A KILLMASTER SPY CHILLER

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NICK CARTER

"NICK CARTER OUT-BONDS JAMES BOND!"
—BUFFALO NEWS

THE GOLDEN SERPENT

Armed with only a suicide pill, Killmaster slips south of the border on a mission to stop the ruin of America's economy by a diabolically clever Chinese plot.

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

Take a Mexican political party that demands the territorial return of Texas... and New Mexico... and Arizona... and California. Add a Chinese paper exporting operation that exports a fine engraver's surface for the familiar five-dollar portrait of Lincoln. Stir with a Countess who has made a fortune in cosmetics and runs a private little kingdom at her castle deep in the Mexican jungle. Mix in the CIA and AXE, prickling each other's sensitivities while the nation and the highest men in government are stumped to stop the ruin of the American economy... And suddenly, in the meeting between Hawk and the CIA man, the ingredients have blended into a little pill they hand Nick Carter. His instructions are: straighten things out — or swallow your defeat in L pills!

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Nick Carter
The Golden Serpent

Dedicated to
The Men of the Secret Services
of the
United States of America

Chapter 1
The Green Plague

Like a green plague, the counterfeit five-dollar bills flowed over the United States. They inundated the country like a vast and secret horde of locusts — each one had to be sought out in its hiding place and killed. And, even when at last the alarm was out, there was no stopping them. Still they came. Not only in the United States, but the world over. Anywhere, everywhere, where the U.S. dollar was in demand, be the demand covert or open, there that same dollar was now suspect. They were exquisite forgeries, so nearly perfect only an expert could tell they were not real. And many of the experts had been fooled.

Finally, in desperation that was near panic, the Treasury had to warn the country at large. Local and regional measures could not cope. The large and efficient body of T-men were powerless. In an admission of near defeat the Secretary of the Treasury went on the air, on all networks, radio and TV, and spoke to the public. Accept no fives, give none, keep what you have until further notice. There was no indication of when that notice would come. Secrecy descended. Washington was sitting on the matter.

In the confines of that Potomac city, in the secret places where policies are made and decisions rendered, the cauldron of apprehension boiled and bubbled.

It was a seething day in Washington. The city was living up to its name of Hell on The Potomac. Normally well-groomed men went about in shirtsleeves and women wore as little as decency required — at times not that — and everywhere the asphalt ran in black rivers and people had faces like wilted lettuce. But in a certain secret room in the Treasury Building it was cool and comfortable, the air-conditioners hummed, and more than a score of worried men sat around a huge U-shaped table and turned the air blue with tobacco smoke and subdued profanity. In a figurative anteroom a great many types of hats and caps would have been represented.

Nick Carter's boss, the dour Hawk, with his inevitable unlit cigar drooping from thin lips, was watching and listening and saying nothing. About his sparse figure, encased now in a rumpled seersucker suit, there was an attitude of waiting. This meeting, he knew, was only one of many. There had been others, there would be more. It would be a little time yet, Hawk thought now, but in the end he knew what it would come to. There was a certain smell about it. Hawk's mouth, cracked and parched from the heat, tightened about his cigar.

It was going to be a shame to call Nick Carter back from Acapulco. For a second Hawk let his attention wander from the matter at hand — he wondered what Nick was doing at the moment. Then he brushed the idle thought away — he was too old, and too busy, to think of such matters. He brought his mind back to the affair at hand.

On the table before each man there was a five-dollar bill. Now one of the men picked up the bill in front of him and examined it again with a glass. There was a battery of small lamps mounted on the table beside him — ultras and infras of various types — and he passed the bill under the lights as he studied it. His mouth was pursed, his forehead creased, as he continued his agonized perusal. There had been a little mosquito buzz of talk around the table, now it gradually ceased and the silence grew as the man still studied the bill. All eyes were on him.

Finally the man took the glass from his eye and flung the bill down on the table. He looked around at the waiting faces. "I say again," he told them. "My final decision — this bill was made from genuine United States Treasury plates. It is absolutely flawless. Only the paper betrays it — and the paper is very, very good."

Across the table another man looked at the speaker. He said, "You know that is impossible, Joe. You know our security measures. Anyway it's such an old plate — a serial of 1941. As a matter of fact it was destroyed just after Pearl Harbor. No, Joe, you've just got to be wrong. Nobody, nothing, could steal a set of plates from the Treasury. Anyway we've checked all that a dozen times — the plates *were* destroyed. All the people involved, both in making and destroying those plates, are dead now. But we've gone into the records so thoroughly that there can't be any doubt about the matter. *Those plates were destroyed!"*

The man who had last examined the bill picked it up again. He gazed from it to the man across the table. "In that case there's a genius somewhere in the world. An engraver who has copied the genuine to absolute perfection."

Down the table another man spoke up. "That's impossible. A set of plates is a work of art — it can never be perfectly duplicated again."

The expert let the five-dollar bill flutter to the table. He looked up and down the table for a moment, then said, "In that case, gentlemen, we are dealing with black magic!"

There was a long silence. Then some wag spoke up. "If they're so damned good why don't we just accept them? Funnel billions into the economy."

His sally did not bring much of a laugh.

The weary looking man, who was chairing the conference from a

raised desk in the slot of the U-shaped table, rapped a gavel. “This is not a matter for levity, gentlemen. Unless we can find the source of these bills and destroy those plates, and very soon, we are in serious trouble. We are, indeed, already in very serious trouble. Millions of our citizens have been bilked, more will be, and that is only in this country.”

The man sitting next to Hawk asked, “What’s the latest figure, sir?”

The chairman picked up a piece of paper from his desk and glanced at it. He sighed. “By computer, and this includes extrapolation, there is now, or soon will be, more than a billion dollars’ worth of these bad bills in circulation.” He took off his old-fashioned pince-nez and rubbed at the red marks on his nose. “You can understand, gentlemen, the enormity of the task ahead of us. Even if we could stop the flow of these bad bills this afternoon, we would still have the gigantic job of rooting them all out and destroying them.”

“We might,” someone said, “make do without five-dollar bills for the next ten years or so.”

The chairman gave the speaker a hard look. “I will not dignify that with a reply, sir. Our first, our foremost and most urgent task, is to find the source of these bills and wipe it out. But that is not *our* province. Not at all. I am sure that the agencies involved are already taking steps. Meeting adjourned, gentlemen.” He rapped his gavel.

As he filed out of the room Hawk thought: I knew it. I knew it in these brittle old bones. It’s going to turn out to be an AXE job yet. This is too big for even the CIA — they haven’t got Nick Carter.

As he stepped into the blazing July day and donned his brown straw hat he was thinking: Nearly a billion bucks already. My God! What an operation! No wonder the T boys and the Secret Service can’t handle it.

He made his way down Pennsylvania Avenue, his heels sinking into asphalt that had the quality of hot mud. His keen, old-fashioned razor of a mind was macerating the problem from every angle. He was enjoying himself. This was the sort of challenge he liked and understood. As he avoided a group of teen-age girls in shorts and bras that would not have been permitted on a beach, he thought: there are only two counterfeiters in the world big enough to rig a deal like this. I wonder which one it is — the Bear or the Dragon?

Hawk decided not to call Nick back yet. Let Number One Boy frolic a bit longer on the Acapulco beach. Killmaster had earned this vacation a thousand times over. Hawk rounded into Dupont Circle and headed for his office hidden in the labyrinth of the Amalgamated Press and Wire Service. It wouldn’t do any harm, he told himself, to

put a few wheels in motion. AXE hadn't been called in yet. Not yet. But it would be. For a moment, as he waited for an elevator, he resembled an old forester sizing-up the tree.

Tony Vargas, renegade and drunk, and late of the Mexican Air Force from which he had been cashiered for cheating at cards, listened to the comfortable drone of the little Beech-craft with an expert ear. His eyes, slightly bleary, scanned the instrument panel for signs of trouble. None. The gas was holding up well. Tony grinned and reached for the pint bottle beside the pilot's seat. This was one time he didn't have to worry about the point of no return. There wasn't going to be any return! Not unless he— Tony grinned again and drew a finger across his throat. Ugh! What they would do to him! But they would never catch him. Never.

Tony reached back to pat one of the large suitcases behind him. Mother of God! What a haul. And he — what an opportunist *he* was. This thing had dropped into his lap, true, but he had had the sense to see it for what it was — a chance to get rich, to be rich for the rest of his life, to travel, to live a little. So much better than flying Madame Bitch and her friends to and from her castle on the Golfo de California. Hah! Tony took another swig from his bottle and licked his lips. He let his thoughts play about the face and figure of his late employer. What a woman! And at her age, too. Just once he would have liked to—

He broke off to bank left and take a quick look at the terrain below. His instructions were to cross the Rio Grande well west of Presidio, but east of Ruidosa. Tony grimaced and took another drink. It was like threading a needle, yes, but he could do it. He had flown border patrol many times when he had been Lt. Antonio Vargas, before they — well, no point thinking of that. Soon he would be a millionaire — well, half a millionaire. It was close enough.

Timing was important, too. He must cross the Rio Grande just before dusk, low, and keeping careful watch for Ranger or Immigration planes and choppers. They were hell on wetbacks these days, the Americans. But what was most important, very important indeed, was that he reach the appointed rendezvous just before dark. He must have light enough to land. There would be no flares. Tony Vargas grinned. Flares. Hah! American gangsters did not put out flares. Tony reached back to stroke the suitcase again. How many millions of the bad stuff, the so beautiful bad stuff, had he packed into that bag in his rush? He could not guess. But plenty. And another bagful as well. For which he was going to receive a half-million good, fine, lovely and *authentic* American dollars!

It had been carefully explained to him, again and again, at the meetings in Mexico City. If he could get the stuff, and *if* he could *get* to

the arranged rendezvous, then he would be paid the half-million. At the last meeting Tony had asked a question. The phony five-dollar bills could not be passed now — they had been interdicted, yes? Any fool who could read the newspapers or listen to the radio knew that. So what could the Syndicate do with the counterfeit after they had it?

He had gotten a pitying look and a harsh answer. The men who were buying the money could afford to wait. Twenty years if they must. The bad stuff would keep until time to start easing it into circulation again. And this time it would be done properly, professionally, not dumped on the market all at once. Tony had read the contempt in the *gringo's* voice for such amateurs. But then the *gringo* did not know everything. Tony could have told him a few things that went on — but that was none of his business. Politics bored Tony.

He glanced at the map strapped to his knee. At the same time he saw the sun sparking on the silver snake of the Rio Grande below and to his left. *Caramba!* He was too early. Then he remembered, glanced at his altimeter. 10,000. That was much too high, of course, but it explained the bright sun. Dusk would be gathering on the ground as the sun went behind the peaks. Nevertheless he banked around in a circle and flew south for a time — losing altitude as he did so — just in case he had been spotted, or had popped onto a radar screen somewhere. Tony grinned and took another drink.

He got down to a thousand, banked around again, and began to skim back toward the Rio Grande. Get it over with. Through the narrow slot and into the wastes of Big Bend National Park. On his map there was traced a rough triangle bounded by Chinati Peak, Santiago Peak, and Cathedral Mountain to the north. In the center of that triangle there was a high mesa where he could land. Twenty miles to the northeast ran a main road, U.S. 90. The men who were to meet him, and pay him, had been waiting a week now. Playing at being campers. They would wait one more week, then they would leave, and the deal would be off.

The wide, shallow Rio Grande — really nothing but mud banks and trickles this time of year — glinted beneath the little plane. He was over. A bit low. He pulled her up and banked around to the northeast. Still a bit early, too. Dusk was just beginning to fall. Tony reached for the pint bottle. What matter? Soon he would be a rich man. He took a drink and put the bottle down.

"Perdition!" This was tricky flying. Nothing but gorges and canyons and peaks. Staying down on the deck was not easy. Tony grinned once more. His last grin. He never saw the jutting crag, like a great fang, that caught the wing of the little Beechcraft.

Jim Yantis, Texas Ranger, had just loaded his horse Yorick into the little van and was sliding behind the wheel of the Ranger car when he saw the Beechcraft go in.

"Goddamn it!" Jim spoke aloud— You get that way alone a lot. "Crap!"

He waited for the blossom of flame. It did not come. So the poor bastard wouldn't be cremated, anyway. There would be something to identify. He got out of the car — Christ, he was tired — and went back to open the van. He led Yorick back down the little ramp and started saddling up. The big roan whinnied and side-stepped in protest and Yantis soothed him with a few strokes.

"I hate it, too," he told the horse. "I know it's time to eat, old buddy, but that's the way the ball bounces. We got to go back in there and find out the name and identity of the clown who just killed himself." He patted Yorick on the nose. "Besides he might not be dead, you know. You don't like jobs like this? You shouldn't have joined the Rangers, pal. Now git!"

It took Jim Yantis nearly an hour to reach the crashed plane. By the time he did it was dark, but a full moon was beginning to hang in the sky over Santiago to the east. From this height he could see the occasional tiny prongs of a solitary car's headlights on Route 90.

The Ranger went through the wreckage with a powerful flashlight. The pilot was dead. There was a pint bottle of whiskey, half full, not broken. Jim Yantis whistled softly. The things some crazy bastards did—

Then he saw the money. One of the large suitcases had broken open and a slight, clean-smelling mountain breeze was riffling the packets of green bills. The Ranger picked up one of the bills and inspected it. A fiver. They were all fivers. He knelt and opened the other suitcase. Full of fivers. Realization dawned as he got up and dusted off his knees.

"Goddamn almighty," he told the horse. "We've stumbled into something this time, boy. We better get back and radio in. And no use complaining about it, because we're going to be sent right back again to stand guard until they get here."

Jim Yantis *thucked* to the horse and started back over the same tortuous trail by which he had come in. Thank God for that big moon! As he rode he thought vaguely of the reason he had been in that part of the country at all. Six men — odd types to find around here, he'd been told — had sort of disappeared into thin air from the Tall Pine Inn. District Headquarters had told Jim to sort of mosey around and see what had happened to them. Well, that would have to wait now. This was bigger than six disappearing strangers!

A phone tinkled in an expensive suite at one of Mexico City's posh hotels. The man at the huge picture window did not turn. He had opened the heavy velvet drapes and stood gazing down onto the Plaza, watching traffic weave golden arabesques around the Cuauhtemoc Statue. It had just turned dusk and a light rain was falling, greasing the busy streets and turning them to black mirrors. Mirrors that reflected a thousand car lights. Won't be long, the man thought with an odd petulance, before the goddamn traffic is as bad here as it is in Los Angeles. Why didn't that stupid *prostituta* hurry up! He was paying her enough!

The phone rang again. The man cursed softly and turned from the window, crossed the luxurious carpeting and picked up the instrument. As he did so he noticed the tremor of his fingers. Damned nerves, he thought. When this last job was over he was getting out. Running and hiding.

He spoke cautiously into the phone. "Yes?"

There was a metallic gabble. As he listened, his pink, well-fed face began to sag. The well-barbered jowls quivered as he shook his head violently.

"No! Don't come here, you idiot. No names. Listen and then hang up immediately. Half an hour, Alameda Park in front of San Juan de Dos. Got it? Good. Goodbye!"

As he put down the phone there was a light tap on the door. The man cursed and went into the foyer. The stupid *puta* would come now! Just when he had to leave.

The woman he admitted was just a bit too flashily dressed, and wearing just a *soupçon* too much of expensive perfume, to be what she purported to be — an upper-stratum call girl! She was young and very pretty, big-breasted, and magnificent legs, but nonetheless there was something of the tart about her. As soon as the door was closed she nuzzled against the man, pushing her body against him.

"I am sorry I am late, darleeng, but I 'ave the many things to do, to get ready. *Perdón?* Anyway you nevair call me until the last second of time!" There was a whore's pout on her scarlet mouth as they went into the living room of the suite.

Maxwell Harper stood close to the woman for a moment, running his hands over her. He had big hands and strong stubby fingers with black hairs between the knuckles. The woman sagged against him, staring vacantly over his shoulder as his hands explored. He might have been frisking her for weapons. Rapidly he traced her thighs, buttocks, waist, breasts. She knew him well enough not to simulate something she did not feel; she had been with Harper many times in the past year, and knew that only under certain conditions was he potent. She was perfectly aware of the routine that was beginning.

But this time Harper pushed her away. He was beginning to quicken and he knew the dangers. He had never been a man to put pleasure before business. “I’m sorry, Rosita. I have to go out. You can wait for me here. I shouldn’t be long.”

She pouted and reached for him, but he eluded her. “You are bad, Maxie,” she chided. “You make me to hurry so, and then you leave me.”

Maxwell Harper went to a closet and took out a Burberry. He adjusted his Homburg in the mirror, frowning at the woman in the glass. Damned whores! Why must they always simper?

“Don’t call me Maxie,” he said curtly. “I told you I wouldn’t be long. Just wait for me. There are plenty of magazines. Order anything you want from room service.”

As the door closed behind him, Rosita stuck out her tongue, flicking it like a little red snake at the departing footsteps. She turned and gazed around the suite for a moment, then went to the phone. With her hand on the instrument she hesitated. She wondered just how long he would be gone. There was a bellboy in the hotel, a very young and handsome boy, who was one of the few men who had ever given her pleasure. She really preferred women for that, but one must admit that Juan was *magnifico.*

Better not. She sighed and flounced across the room to a divan and sat down. She picked up a copy of *Harper’s* from a coffee table and began to flick through it idly. When she noticed the similarity of names she giggled and stuck out her tongue at the magazine. Maybe the fat pig owned this also, *la revista?* Who could know? Certainly he was rich enough to pay her well for his odd pleasures. She found a long cigarette in a silver box, lit it and put it in her scarlet mouth, and sat gazing through the smoke at the high fashion clothes. Perhaps, after tonight, she could afford such as these, *Quien sabe?*

Maxwell Harper walked quickly to Alameda Park. A fine drizzle was still falling and he turned up the corner of his Burberry. For a big man, now running slightly to paunch, he moved well. Even so he was panting slightly, and there was a light dew of moisture on his forehead when he reached the Church of San Juan de Dos. As he strolled past the dimly lit facade a slight figure left a narrow gothic niche and followed Harper into the park. There are always strollers and sitters in Alameda Park when it is warm, even in the rain, and the two men were not conspicuous.

The man who had fallen in beside Harper might have been a *mestizo*, a mixture of Spanish and Indian, but in fact he was Chinese. His real name was Chung Hee, though at the moment he was passing under the name of Hurtada. His ability to pass as a *mestizo* was not remarkable. Anyone who has noticed Oriental crews in Mexican ports

has also noticed the startling likeness in physiognomy. It is the Indian strain that does it; both are descended from remote Mongol ancestors. Certainly Peking had not overlooked it.

Chung Hee, or Hurtada, was a short sturdy man. He wore a cheap slicker over a neat business suit and a Trilby hat covered by a plastic rain shield. As the two men entered a narrow, badly lit path, Maxwell Harper said, "How in God's name did that drunk get into the vaults in the first place? Damn! I can't leave for an hour, but something like this happens!"

His smaller companion shot Harper a look that bore a hint of nastiness, but his reply was calm. "You have been gone for two days now, Harper. I have had everything on my shoulders. I admit it was a failure of security, a very bad one, but Vargas has been staying at the castle when he is not working. I could not keep my thumb on him. You know the strains under which we work — two separate security forces, two projects you might say. Until we take over completely I cannot be expected to be responsible for the castle and Lady Bitch *and* all her employees. Anyway who would have expected that drunk Vargas to pull a trick like this? I myself wouldn't have thought he was ever sober enough, or had the guts!"

Harper nodded reluctantly. "Yes. We underestimated that lush. But let's not thumb the panic button. I'll admit it's dangerous, but blowing our tops won't help. I don't suppose there is any chance of catching Vargas?"

They came to a quiet spot, remote from the center of the park, where a single light wore a nimbus of mist. There was a bench. Harper sank down on it heavily and lit a cigar. Hurtada paced nervously up and down on the path, as though he were on a quarterdeck.

"I don't see how in hell we can catch him," he rasped. "He filled a couple of bags with money, stole a jeep and drove to the airstrip and took off in the Beechcraft. As the Americans say — off in the wild blue yonder. We don't even know which way he went. How do you expect to find him, Harper?"

"No names!" snapped Harper. He glanced at the wet bushes behind the bench.

Hurtada stopped pacing and stared down at Harper. "I know something! You're worrying too much about your own skin these days. Well, maybe that figures. You're in this only for money." He leaned closer to the big man and whispered, "You don't have to go back to China someday. I do. It makes for a difference in viewpoint, you perverted fat bastard. And I say we're in trouble. Think, man! Vargas is a drunk! He's got millions of that bad money and he's got an airplane. He's also got a few bottles around. What does all that add up to?"

Harper held up a fleshy hand, the cigar glowing between his fingers. “All right — all right! No use in us falling out. That *would* bollux things. And don’t call me names! Don’t forget I’m in command of this operation, damn it.”

“They must be crazy in Peking,” said Hurtada. But the voice was that of Chung Hee.

Harper ignored the slur. “As I see it we’ve got two choices — panic and pack up and run for it, or wait and see what develops. We’ll look awful fools if we blow an operation like this before we have to. And you’re right — we *don’t* know where Vargas has gone. I doubt he would go north, to the States. Probably he’s headed south, for Central or South America. He is a hell of a fine flyer, you know, and he’s just crooked enough to know the ropes. I say we wait and see — if he goes south we’re probably all right. He’ll hole up somewhere and try to feed that money into circulation slowly.”

The Chinese stopped pacing and sank down on the wet bench, staring gloomily at the gravel path. “There’s only one good thing about this whole mess — at least the sonofabitch didn’t take the good money. He couldn’t get into that vault.”

Hurtada’s cuff had slipped up. Something glinted on his thin wrist. Absently he fingered the gold-plated bracelet, a serpent with its tail in its mouth. Light shimmered from the bracelet and Harper stared at it for a moment. A thought struck him. “Vargas didn’t know anything about the Party, did he? I mean he wasn’t working in it — he wasn’t on the inside?”

“Of course not,” said the Chinese with irritation. “How could he be? He’s just a drunken fool. How could we use him?”

“He foxed your security,” Harper said slyly. Then, at the look on Hurtada’s face he hurried on, “I thought I saw him wearing one of the bracelets a time or two. That’s why I asked.”

Hurtada shrugged. “Maybe he did. A lot of people wear them who have nothing to do with the Serpent Party. Even kids. The more the better — I thought we agreed on that. Like campaign buttons in the States.”

“But in this case,” Harper began, then shook his head. He stood up. “Let’s break this off now. Get back up the coast. Stay away from the castle and the Bitch. And tighten your security, for God’s sake.”

Hurtada scowled. “I have. Personally. The two guards who shared a bottle with Vargas will never share another one. With anybody.”

“Good. I hope you took them well out to sea.” Harper patted the Chinese on the shoulder. “I’ll drive up first thing in the morning. I’ve got a little business to finish up. By the time I get there I’ll have made a decision. Stick it out or run for it. I’ll let you know.”

As they were about to part Hurtada said, “You know I’ll have to

report this. I'll have to contact Sea Dragon and have it relayed to Peking."

Maxwell Harper stared at his companion for a long time. His little eyes, glinting hard gray in their fat rings, were cold.

"Suit yourself about that," he said finally. "I can't stop you. But if I were you I wouldn't — not just yet. The Party is just beginning to roll, to show results. If we fold up now we blow an awful lot of ground work. But suit yourself."

As he turned away down the path Harper glanced back at the little man. "After all," he said with malice, "you are the one in charge of security. Peking knows that. *I* didn't let Vargas get away with the money."

Peking is a city constructed rather on the order of a set of Chinese boxes. There is the Outer City. Then there is the Inner, or Forbidden City, and nestling in the heat — the core — is the Imperial City. This is the very penetralia of the Chinese Central Committee. As in all bureaucracies, be they under dictatorship or democracy, there are a very great many obscure offices scattered about in hard-to-find buildings. Such an office was that of the man in charge of Political and Economic Warfare.

His name was Liu Shao-hi and he was in his early fifties. He was a slight man, a pale, yellow little man with something of the delicacy of Ming about him. Liu was a reticent man, with a courteous reserve that seemed to belong more to the old China than to the new, but the true index of Liu lay in his eyes. Obsidian in color and texture, alert, burning with furious intelligence and impatience. Liu knew his job and he had power in high places.

He looked up from some papers now as an assistant entered with a dispatch. He put the sheet of paper on the desk. "The latest from Sea Dragon, sir." The assistant knew better than to call Liu "comrade," no matter what was set down in party protocol.

Liu waved a hand in dismissal. When the man had gone he picked up the dispatch and read it carefully. He read it again. The beginnings of a frown puckered his smooth forehead. Things were going very well indeed in Mexico, it seemed. Almost too well. Such optimism worried him. He pressed a button on his desk.

When the assistant re-entered, Liu said, "Where is Sea Dragon at this moment?"

The man went to a wall and pulled down a large map. Without hesitation he moved a red pin from one spot to another. It was his job to know these things. Now he pointed to the red pin.

"Roughly, sir, about 108 west by 24 north. We have been using the Tropic of Cancer for latitude. It is close enough. You have an order

to go to Sea Dragon, sir?"

Liu held up a hand for silence. His superb brain was visualizing the map of that part of the world. He did not go to the wall map. After a moment he said, "Isn't that around the mouth of the Gulf of California?"

"Yes, sir. The Sea Dragon lies on the bottom during the day, sir, and—"

"When I need instruction in the elementals," Liu said, fixing him with an opaque stare, "I will let you know. Go." The man fled.

Alone, Liu picked up the dispatch and studied it again. Finally he put it aside and got back to his papers. The Mexican venture was a gamble, of course. A great gamble. It seemed to be going well. Yet he was uneasy. It never paid to trust your agents too much! What this needed was an on the job inspection, by himself, and that was impossible. Liu sighed and kept on working, his old-fashioned pen hissing like a serpent on the paper.

Chapter 2
Brief Idyll

Sunset in Acapulco. The surrounding mountains were purpling in the encroaching dusk and a few lights twinkled on in the white luxury hotels. Belated yachts were hurrying in from the open sea to a snug harbor. The air had cooled to just the right degree, so that now it was like satin on the flesh.

Nick Carter lay content on a deserted strip of beach and let the quiet beauty of the moment sink into him. The girl lay silent also and for the moment it was enough. She had been an incessant little chatterbox all afternoon, so gay and amusing — and eager — that Nick, beguiled as he was by her, now found himself grateful for quiet.

They lay, eyes closed, only their thighs touching, hers thin and deeply tanned, his deceptively slim and heavy with muscle. Nearby on the sand lay a ravaged picnic basket and two empty wine bottles. They had contained *Taittinger Blanc des Blancs.* The Chardonnay grape. Killmaster could feel the gentle effervescence of the wine in him now. The drink was, to some small degree, affecting him physically; he hoped it was not affecting his mental processes. Because he had soon to make a decision. About the girl, Angelita Dolores Rita Inez Delgado.

It was a rough decision to make.

Nick half opened his eyes to squint seaward. The sun was a gigantic gold medallion hovering just above the water, the skies around it whipped into a froth of superb color, whorls and ramparts of rose and pink and every shade of blue. No one had ever called Killmaster an esthete, but he found himself wishing that the moment could somehow be caught and imprisoned, captured and held until it was again needed. For the first time, vaguely, he understood the impact that great painting could have. A half-smile quirked his firm, mobile lips. It was a mouth that could be stern when he was dealing out death, a mouth whose hard smile could be as frightening as a skull's. Now, and the firm mouth showed it, Nick Carter was as near to tenderness as he could ever get.

A party of riders cantered past, silhouetted black against the half-submerged sun. The riders glanced at the little boat drawn up on the sand, its red sail drooping, and at the two supine figures so close together. They laughed together briefly and one of them called out a greeting. Nick raised a lazy hand in reply. Then the riders had gone, the *clop-clop* of hooves on sand slowly dying away. The two were alone on the white-gold sand except for a single greedy pelican who waddled near and eyed the picnic basket.

"Nick?" Angelita's thigh pressed closer. Her finger began to trace little curlicues on the inside of his left arm, just above the elbow.

"Ummmm?" Nick closed his eyes against the golden shafts of the sun. He told himself that he *must* make a decision. Soon. He had a feeling that Angie was about to become insistent. She had been pursuing him relentlessly for a week now, her motives transparent from the very first. This girl was determined to immolate herself, to sacrifice the virgin in her on the altar of Nick's manhood. And Nick, for some strange reason that he himself could not understand, was reluctant to accept the sacrifice. He was vastly puzzled at his own behavior. Not that he had had any great experience with maidens, at least not since his college days when, like all sophisticated young men, he had deflowered a few. Since then, however, he had come to like his women beautiful, experienced, and just a little older than Angie's twenty-one years. Yet here he was on the beach with this lovely little Mexican hot pants — and still he had not made a decision. To seduce or not to seduce? Nick had to grin at that. It was going to be most difficult to assign the responsibility for this seduction. If it occurred.

"Nick, darling?" Her fingers were tracing his arm again.

He kept his eyes closed. "Silence is golden, Angie."

She giggled. "I am tired of being silent. Besides I want to know — what is this mark you have, this tattoo?"

It was the tiny blue hatchet, of course. The symbol of AXE. An ultimate identification — and the reason he must swim on secluded beaches. Time and again he had remonstrated with the powers, urging that the little tattoo was useless and a dead giveaway, but to no avail. Axe, in its own way, could be as tradition-minded as any of the older services.

Now he said: "I ran away to sea when I was a small boy. I got tattooed all over. All boys do. When I got back home my mother made me take them all off except that one. I cried so hard she let me keep it."

Angie punched him in the side. "What a liar!"

Nick smiled at the darkening sky. "Aren't I, though."

Her fingers began to trace the corded muscle of his belly. "You are a beautiful man, Nick. I have never seen one so beautiful. You have muscles, lovely ones, but you are smooth. You know — not like the beach boys. They are all knots and bulges. And they show off all the time."

"I don't?"

The girl laughed. "You? Show off? Hah — most of the time I cannot even find you. You avoid me. I know it."

It was true. He *had* tried to avoid Angie for a time. So much vibrant youth, so nubile and sleek and lovely, had very nearly

frightened him at first. How Hawk would have laughed at that! This man they called Killmaster, this professional killer of his country's enemies, this finely conditioned and perfectly trained machine, as brave as a bull and as subtle as a fer-de-lance — this man afraid of a mere chit of a girl?

The sun had quite gone now. Nick felt a strange, noiseless tension in the air as he put an arm about the girl and held her closely, as yet without passion. The embers of the sunset were glowing, a muted *Götterdämmerung* without terror or consequence, and over the opal waters, stretching in tenuous threads of non-sound, he could *hear* the color.

He kissed the girl lightly on the lips. She clung to him, her mouth as sweet as a flower, and wriggled her brown limbs in an ecstasy that was as graceless, and as innocent, as a puppy's. She whispered against his mouth.

"I have been very shameless, Nick. I admit it now. But I want you very much and — and you are not like other things. I cannot go to my Papa and say buy it for me, can I? So I have to chase you, to make a little fool of myself. I do not mind too much. Because this is very important to me. Very important!" Only occasionally, when she was excited, did the Radcliffe education slip enough to reveal that English was not her first language.

Nick was aware of her. She wore the skimpiest of bikinis, two narrow yellow strips of nothing, and now he had an unobstructed view of one soft round breast.

"Yes," he said. "There is Papa to consider." Papa owned half the cattle in Mexico, bred prize bulls, and was very high up in the Mexican government. It was, Nick thought now, with some degree of petulance, a hell of a note when a man had to consider such matters before he made love to a girl. But there it was. Face it. The Mexican government, the United States government, AXE, Hawk — none would look kindly on the seduction of this wholesome, hot-blooded little nymph who looked like a young and very tender Dolores Del Rio.

"I wonder," said Nick, postponing the moment of truth, "whatever happened to the duenna system? It had its points. Well-bred young ladies didn't get into situations like this. They didn't go bathing on remote beaches with strange men."

Angie giggled. She rolled over on top of him, plastering her warm young flesh to his like a lovely leech. "*You* are the one who needs the chaperone, Nick. You know... I really think you are afraid of me." She nuzzled closer and kissed his throat. Nick put his arms about her. For a long time she lay atop him, perfectly quiet. A soft little breeze skittered past, tossing a thin film of sand over them.

When the girl spoke again she was very serious. "You will not

laugh at me, Nick, if I tell you some things."

"I won't laugh."

"Then close your eyes. I cannot say them if you are looking at me."

"They're closed."

She lay with her cheek against the great arch of his chest. She was almost whispering. "I... I have never been with a man, Nick. Maybe you guess that? I am sure you did — you who are so much a man of the world. Well, for a long time now I have been looking for my first man. I *told* you I am a bad girl. Shameless. But I want him to be the right man, Nick! For the first time, I always tell myself, it must be the perfect man. Sometimes, many times, I think I have found him. But always something is wrong. Then, at last, I find you. And I know it is right!"

Nick kept his eyes closed. He could feel the velvet sheen of her back beneath his fingers. Here it was, in all the freshness and directness of youth without hypocrisy. She was only a child, of course, but yet there was about her the wisdom of eternal woman.

Still Nick hesitated. He did not understand it himself. He was all male animal — at times even something of a brute — and her smooth body, with the warmth glowing beneath it, was arousing him. His loins were stirring, fast threatening to take over his mind. And, he told himself, if not he then it would be someone else. Perhaps some boor, some clown, some sexual opportunist who would hurt and disillusion her. It was bound to happen soon. Inevitable. Angie was ripe for the plucking — and quite determined to be plucked!

The girl settled matters. She wriggled twice, three times, and snapped a drawstring loose. Both parts of the tiny bikini sailed through the air to lie on the sand. The breeze swooped and whirled them away. Nick watched them come to rest against a half-buried dune fence.

Angie was naked atop him now. Her mouth was glued to his. "Please," she whispered. "Please take me, Nick. Teach me. Be kind and gentle and take me. I want to so much, Nick. With you."

Nick put one big arm about her and held her close. Her small tongue was hot and sharp and moist in his mouth. He began to kiss her, really kiss her, and Angie moaned and wriggled atop him. He could feel the minute prick of tiny pink nipples against his chest.

With a swift fluid motion he got up, the girl dangling over his shoulder. He gently slapped her taut little behind. "All right," Nick said softly. "All right, Angie."

It was the last moment before full darkness, a last hint of purple lingering in the air. Standing there in the gloaming, with his incredible width of shoulder and narrow waist, the two strong

columns of his legs, Nick might have been a magnificent specimen of primeval man bringing his bride home to the cave. The girl lay lax over his shoulder, unmoving, arms dangling and the dark hair floating like a banner in the breeze.

In the large dune, near where her bikini had lodged, the wind had hollowed out a shallow cave. Nick took her there and gently put her down. At the last moment, her arms hugging him tight and her mouth hot against his ear, she whispered: “Is... is it going to hurt much?” He felt her thin body begin to tremble.

He kissed her into silence. And he was as gentle as he knew how, not an easy thing for Nick when he was aroused.

So it was that Angelita Dolores Rita Inez Delgado came at last to womanhood. If he hurt her she made no outcry except for a gasping scream at the very end. Nick, suffused with pleasure and some wonderment, felt a genuine gratitude for the gift this girl-woman had bestowed on him.

When he got back to his bungalow at the Las Brisas Hilton there was a telegram thrust beneath his door. It could only mean one thing. His vacation was over. He ripped the yellow envelope open.

Excalibur — stop — Musty — stop — 33116 — stop — Blackbird — end—

Nick, who at the moment was traveling under the name of Carter Manning, did not have a code book with him. AXE had only a few code books and they were well guarded. But then he did not need a code book for this message. Hawk knew that, of course.

Excalibur — come at once.

Musty — Emergency — most urgent.

33116 — latitude and longitude. Nick took a small map from a suitcase and with a pencil circled the largest city in the vicinity of the given longitude and latitude. San Diego.

Frowning, because he knew how it was going to look — and how Angie was going to feel — he wrote a brief note to the girl. He called a boy and sent the note, along with a dozen roses, to her hotel. She wouldn’t understand, of course. She would never understand and she would be hurt, but there was no help for it.

Half an hour later he was at the airport.

Chapter 3
A Chinese Fist

As Nick Carter was about to leave the airport in San Diego, a compact, hard-faced man, who had been lounging about the entrance, spoke to him. The man had an unlit cigarette in his mouth and he was fumbling in his pockets. As Nick approached he said, “Pardon, buddy. You got a match?”

Nick, who had been wondering about his pickup, produced a large, kitchen-size match and struck it on his shoe. The man nodded slightly. “I’m Sergeant Preston, sir. Marine C.I.C. I’ve got a car waiting.”

The Sergeant took Nick’s bag and led him to a jazzy little sports roadster. As the AXEman tried to squeeze his big frame into the bucket seat he said, “I’ve often wondered what would happen if the wrong guy happened to be using kitchen matches on a particular day. It could result in a lulu of a mixup.”

The Sergeant proved humorless. His cold eyes flicked over Nick without a smile. “Not likely to happen, sir. Very few men use them.”

It was a beautiful July day, all gold and blue and breezy, and Nick relaxed. “Where are we going, Sergeant?”

“Not very far with me, sir. Seven or eight blocks, then I drop you off.”

A few minutes later the driver turned off Chula Vista Avenue onto a quiet side street. He stopped beside a long black sedan. “Here you are, sir. There’s a gentleman waiting for you.”

The gentleman was Hawk, looking thin and tired in the vastness of the rear seat. He appeared to have been sleeping in his seersucker suit, and his old brown straw hat was limp and soiled. His shirt collar was dirty and his tie had been pulled into a Gordian knot. His face, the color and texture of old parchment, cracked around his unlit cigar as he greeted Nick.

“You look fine,” said Hawk. “Nice tan. As though you had just stepped out of a bandbox. As usual.” Hawk was given to such old-fashioned expressions.

Nick sank into the seat beside his Chief and looked the older man up and down. “That’s more than I can say for you, sir. You look a little beat up.”

Hawk gave a command to the driver, who wore chauffeur’s livery, and closed the glass partition. “I know,” he said. “I feel beat up. I haven’t been lolling on any beach watching the bikinis go by.” He rolled his cigar to the other side of his mouth and added, “But I don’t

begrudge you, my boy. You're going to earn that vacation — retroactively, you might say." He stared at Nick with a hint of good-natured malice in his shrewd old eyes.

Nick lit one of his gold-tipped cigarettes. "Rough one, sir?"

Hawk nodded. "You might say that, son. Maybe rough, maybe not, but sure as hell complicated. If I allowed myself profanity I would call it a many-faceted sonofabitch! That's why I wanted to see you before we go to the briefing — get a few things straight. The deal is, Nick, we're lending you to the CIA. They asked for you specifically and of course I had to go along."

Nick repressed a grin.

Hawk rolled down a window and tossed away his chewed cigar. He popped a fresh one into his mouth. "Their budget is four times ours," he said with satisfaction. "Yet they have to come to us when they get in a real jam. I knew they would, of course. What I didn't expect was that the head man, in person, would come to us. He's here now, in San Diego. We'll be meeting him at the Naval Air Station in a few minutes. I thought you had better know. Better than just walking in and meeting him cold."

Nick Carter nodded. He knew what was troubling his boss. "I'll mind my manners," he said gravely. "I'll speak only when spoken to, and I won't forget to 'sir' him. Okay?"

Hawk shot him a glance. "Never mind the levity, son. And you know I'm not worried about your manners. It's just that, well, you know how CIA and AXE see things a lot differently sometimes. It figures. We're in different lines of endeavor, so to speak. All I want you to do is listen. Listen and digest and be polite. Play along. Then we'll do it our own way. Understand?"

Nick said he understood. It was not the first time the situation had arisen. AXE was a small, tight, compact outfit with very definite ideas on how to do its job; CIA was a great sprawling complex of men and facilities and functions, with aims and motives usually different from those of AXE. Some friction was inevitable.

On the way up from Acapulco Nick had been doing some thinking. Now he asked, "Does this mission have anything to do with that wave of phony five-dollar bills?"

Hawk nodded. "Right the first time. I'm surprised that you know about that. You mean you tore yourself away from your fleshpots long enough to read a newspaper?"

Nick shook his head and smiled. "Nope. Radio. I was in bed at the time."

"I'll bet."

"They don't seem to be passing them in Mexico," Nick said.

Hawk nodded. "That makes sense. If we've got this thing doped

right, the bad stuff is *coming* from Mexico. They wouldn't want to foul their own nest. But there is a lot more to this than just the counterfeit bills. A hell of a lot more. Most of it I don't know myself yet. That's why we're going to meet Mr. Big. He dropped all his other chores and flew out here to talk to you personally. That, son, will give you some slight idea of just how important this mission is!" Nick whistled softly. Not a man to be easily impressed, he was impressed now. It looked as if he would be returning to Mexico *muy pronto.* This time he doubted if there would be any Angies...

Half an hour later Nick and Hawk had been locked into a snug, map-lined room in a sub-basement of the Naval Air Station. Outside a red light was burning over the door. Nick had been introduced, had shaken hands, and had undergone a searching scrutiny by a pair of coldly intelligent eyes. The head of the CIA was a big man, husky, with a nose that might have been flattened in a fight or football, a pugnacious jaw, and a mop of flaming red hair.

Nick sat quietly and waited. Smoking was permitted and he lit a gold tip and amused himself by watching Hawk try to restrain his natural militancy and pride in AXE. Hawk was a fire eater and saw red at any hint of condescension. Try to patronize Hawk and you were in trouble. The trouble here, Nick thought, was that although the men held equal rank — CIA was senior. And Hawk knew it.

Hawk and Nick remained seated while the CIA chief paced briefly, a pointer in his hand. He hesitated a moment before a map, then came to stand before Nick. "Do you carry a cyanide pill, Carter? Or any device that will give you a quick and easy death?"

Nick met the cold eyes steadily. "No, sir. I never have."

"You will on this mission. You're going to hear things in this room that are beyond top secret. The fact is that we don't have an adequate label for these things — call them top secret and you still don't quite get it. Do I make myself clear?"

Hawk, a little gruffly, said: "Carter's clearance is the same as mine, Rad. You know what that is." It was as high as they came. Hawk, along with the CIA man and a few others, was on a level with the President in security matters.

The CIA chief nodded. "I know, David. But he will carry a cyanide pill, or an equivalent. He will use it if he is taken and made subject to torture. I'm senior, and I'm in command of this mission by direct orders of the President. Cyanide is an order!"

Hawk looked at Nick, who thought he detected a slight flutter of wink as his boss said, "You will carry cyanide, Nick."

"Yes, sir."

"Okay," said the CIA man. "Let's get on with it. We've got a lot of ground to cover. I think the best way is for you two to listen while I

run through the whole thing. Save your questions until afterward. You can take notes if you like, Carter, but burn them before you leave this room."

Nick smiled. "No need for that, sir. I remember very well."

"All right. Here we go. For convenience, and to help you remember, I'm going to divide this briefing into two main parts — the facts, what we actually know; and the educated guesses we're making, the hypotheses. As you must know, in any operation such as this we have to go by guess and by God and hope we're right."

The big redheaded man went to the desk and picked up something. He handed it to Nick. The AXE agent examined it carefully. It was a golden bracelet in the form of a serpent with its tail in its mouth. Nick ran his fingers over the thing and detected minute flutings, or ridges, just in back of the flat head.

The CIA man was watching him. "You feel them, eh? They're hard to see. The workmanship is poor, but those little ridges are supposed to be feathers."

Nick took a small magnifying glass from his pocket and examined the bracelet again. He could see now that it was only gold plate, and slovenly made. He put the glass away and handed the bracelet back to the CIA man. He had known the symbol instantly.

"That's the Feathered Serpent," he said. "The symbol of the old Aztec god, Quetzalcoatl."

The CIA man seemed pleased. A grim smile hovered on his hard face for a moment. He tossed the bracelet back on the desk. "Right. It is also the symbol, or insignia, of a new political party in Mexico. They use the bracelets as we use campaign buttons. They call themselves the Radical-Democrats, or the Serpent Party, and just to give you an idea of the party line — they're yelling for the return of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona *and* California to Mexico!"

Even Hawk was jolted out of his usual composure. "What? That's incredible! They must be a bunch of nuts."

The CIA man shrugged. "Not so nuts, maybe. Of course the leaders don't believe that nonsense themselves — but it sounds good to the peasants in the poor districts. That doesn't concern us now — what does concern us is that our experts think the bracelets are made in China. And I don't mean Taiwan!"

Hawk was thinking: so it is the Dragon after all.

The CIA boss picked up the bracelet again and spun it on his finger. "This was taken from a dead man. He crashed his plane in Texas and a Ranger saw the crash and found the wreckage. He found something else, too. Two suitcases loaded with counterfeit five-dollar bills. We were notified immediately and got right to work. I think our men have done a tremendous job. We sealed off the area and went

over that plane with a glass, you might say. I think we've milked it for all it's worth."

He went to a map and with a red crayon drew a small circle in Texas near the Mexican border. "The plane crashed here, in Big Bend Park. Luckily for us it didn't burn. From the amount of gas left in the tanks we were able to plot a back trail for the plane. Within a certain radius, of course. That helped a little, but it was only a start. From the dried mud, and some twigs and leaves on the undercarriage, our men managed to narrow it down a bit more. Most important was the mud — it came from gold-bearing earth. We found very faint traces of gold ore."

"There's a lot of gold in Mexico," Hawk said. "And it's a hell of a big country."

The CIA man's smile was cold. "Exactly, David. A hell of a big country. But we got a little lucky. By reverse projection we could establish a possible takeoff point for the plane that crashed — always within a certain radius, naturally. But we were looking for gold country, and for country where the vegetation matched what was found caught in the undercarriage, all within the imaginary line based on the gas consumption of the plane. We think we've found it." The CIA man drew another red circle, larger this time, on the map. Nick went close to study it.

The demarcated area was on the west coast of Mexico, roughly parallel with the mouth of the Bay of California. The red arc ran inland through Mazatlan as far as Durango, then curved north into the Sierra Madre range. The line came back to the Bay at Los Mochis, on the alternate Pan American Highway.

Nick Carter stared at the CIA man. "That *is* a hell of a lot of territory — for one man." He knew, of course, that he was going to have to do this alone.

"It's not as bad as it looks." The CIA man made a dot on the map. "Right here, between the villages of La Cruz and Elota, there is an airstrip. It's privately owned and being used now — I'll tell you about that later — but formerly it was used to fly out gold shipments. That's gold mining country around there, or used to be. Our best information is that it's mined out now. Deserted. And it is also pretty wild country. Bandit country. I'll tell you about the bandits later, too."

Hawk walked to the map now, a cigar drooping from his thin mouth. "That's the only airstrip around there?"

"As far as we know. We're pretty certain that the plane that crashed must have come from that strip. Everything fits. The earth specimens, the vegetation, the gas consumption." The CIA man pointed to the larger circle again. "The counterfeit is being made, or at least distributed, somewhere in here."

Hawk was looking skeptical. “Maybe. But it seems a little too simple to me. That plane, I mean, flying over the border with a load of queer money in broad daylight. Just asking for trouble. Those counterfeiters are a lot smarter than that — look at how they plastered the country with those bills before the T-men woke up. No. Something’s wrong with that picture.”

The CIA man rubbed his thatch of red hair. Of a sudden he looked tired and strained. “You’re right, of course. That’s, been puzzling us, too. But we’ve got a sort of a theory about it. The pilot’s name was Antonio Vargas. A renegade type, from what we can get out of Mexico City. He was booted out of the Mexican Air Force some years ago. And he had a reputation as a drunk. We’re inclined to think that maybe he was working for himself this time — he just snatched a load of counterfeit and took off. Maybe he had cooked up some sort of deal in the States. That’s not really important to us now.”

Nick ran his finger around the red circle. “You want me to go in there and see what I can find?”

“We do,” said the boss of the CIA, “But that is only your primary mission. There is a lot more to it than you’ve heard so far.” He glanced at his watch. “I suggest we take ten, gentlemen. I could use a drink.”

Nick settled for sandwiches and a beer. Hawk and the man from CIA took bourbon and Scotch respectively. When they had finished, the CIA man relaxed at his desk and lit a cigar. Hawk began to gum a fresh one. Nick sat near the wall map, studying it, and smoked a cigarette.

Neither he, nor Hawk was prepared for the bomb.

“The Chinese Reds,” said the CIA man in an ordinary conversational tone, “have a fleet of six nuclear subs. Snorkels. Some of them are capable of carrying midget subs, of launching and recovering them at sea. We think one of those subs is lying somewhere around the Gulf of California right now.”

It was the first time Nick had ever seen Hawk look truly shocked. Frightened. “Nuclear subs? Good God! You’re sure there’s no mistake?”

The redheaded man shook his head. “No mistake. I wish there were. They’ve got them, all right. Capable of launching missiles, too. Only they haven’t got any missiles. Yet.”

Nick felt his guts tighten. Chinese subs prowling the Pacific coast! It was not a pretty picture.

The CIA man was looking at him. “That’s why I insist on the cyanide,” he said. “You have to know about the subs so you can do your job properly, but you mustn’t talk if you’re captured and tortured. It cost us a few million dollars and the lives of six agents to

find out about those subs. The Chinese have guarded that secret the way we guarded the atomic bomb. But we found out. We know where those subs are. But the Chinese don't know that we know — and they must never find out! If they do find out they'll move the subs, they'll just disappear, and we'll have to start all over again. Above all we must keep them thinking that their secret is safe."

Again the CIA chief went to the map. He touched the Gulf of California with the glowing tip of his cigar, leaving an ash smudge. "I said the Chinese have six subs. So they have. But only five are where they should be at the present time. We're guessing that the other one, the sixth sub, is lying around this vicinity somewhere. We think that it is somehow tied in with the counterfeiting — and also with the Serpent Party. And I'll admit we're getting pretty hypothetical now. Still, we've got a few clues and—"

"The paper," Hawk broke in. "That nearly perfect paper the phony bills are printed on. The Chinese invented paper!"

The CIA man nodded. "It's a possibility that we've considered. That they're running in the paper for the bills. But the Chinese didn't make those plates, or so our experts tell us. But more of that later. Right now let's concentrate on this sub we think is messing around off the Mexican coast."

The CIA man swished the dregs of his Scotch around in his glass and gazed at the ceiling for a moment. "We've got a lot of monitoring stations around the world, as you know. Some in places that would surprise even you, David. Well, for the last two months we've had indications that a sub, not ours, has been working up and down our Pacific coast. But they're cagy as hell — they change positions constantly and their transmissions are very short. Until a couple of days ago we couldn't get anything like a fix on them. Then we got a break, they used their wireless for a longer time than usual, and we did get sort of a rough fix." He pointed to the map. "As near as we could get it — off the tip of the Baja peninsula and about fifty to a hundred miles off the Mexican coast. That's a lot of ocean, of course, and we don't have much hope of finding them, but we're trying. A dozen destroyers are working the area now."

Hawk asked, "Are we with the Mexicans on this? Nick has to know that. Are we keeping them informed?"

The CIA Director did not answer for a moment. An enigmatic look was frozen on the hard features. He caressed his battered nose with a forefinger as he stared back at Hawk.

"Not exactly," he said finally. "Not to the fullest extent, at least. Officially the CIA is helping them keep an eye on the Serpent Party, which doesn't appear to concern them much, but they know nothing about the rest of the problem."

Hawk nodded dourly. “I thought not. This is going to be a regular ‘black’ operation, then?”

The Director’s smile was faint. “Yes. That’s why you were called in. I, we, defer to you people in handling these things, these ‘black’ operations as you call them. You people in AXE are the experts, after all.”

Hawk flipped his chewed cigar at a wastebasket and fumbled for a new one. “Just so that’s understood.” He inclined his head toward Nick. “When my man is on the ground, and takes over, he will be allowed to do things his own way?”

“Within the limits of his instructions,” the CIA man said. A little stiffly, Nick thought. “He is not to exceed them.”

Nick felt, rather than saw, Hawk’s wink. “Okay,” said his Chief. “Let’s get on with it. I take it there is more?”

“Much more. To get back to the Chinese sub we think is lurking about. As I explained, we’ve gotten a partial fix on her. But there have been *two* sets of rather mysterious transmissions in that area. One from the mainland, on a rather weak set — weak, but capable of reaching the sub. Another, from the sub, we think, to practically anywhere in the world. Very powerful beam. So again we have a lead pointing to that part of Mexico. We think the land station is working the sub, and the sub is relaying the messages. To China, most likely. They’re arrogant bastards, too. They’re using a straight code. In English!”

He picked up a yellow flimsy from his desk and looked at it with a show of distaste. “This is a fragmentary message that our monitors got. They use the standard wireless procedures, never any voice. Listen to this.

“Talon — weight — topaz — willow — greensleeve — track — martini — bo — that’s all we got of that particular transmission. But as you see it’s code, not cipher, and we haven’t a prayer of cracking it.” He grinned without mirth. “We’ve got some good men in China, but they haven’t yet managed to steal the master code book.”

Hawk chewed his cigar for a moment. Then, “You’re *positive* this is a Chinese sub? Not the other people’s?”

The Director tossed the flimsy aside. “That was a possibility at first, but we had the tapes analyzed at the National Security Agency in Fort Meade and they tell us it is definitely a Chinese fist.”

Nick knew that every country, every military or para-military organization, had its own peculiar way of sending code, of handling a key. You could usually tell the nationality of a radioman, or at least that of his outfit, by the way he handled a key. This individual style was called his “fist.”

Nick asked a question: “These transmissions — do they use a bug,

tape, or manual?"

The Director glanced at another slip of paper. "The shore to sub transmissions are manual, very slow and amateurish. The sub to God knows where transmissions are sent by a bug, automatic key, and done by an expert." He glanced at a watch strapped to one hirsute wrist. "Come to the map now, gentlemen, and I'll tell you about a few more complicating factors in this operation. Matters which will have to be handled very delicately. They involve a very important American citizen, or should I say citizeness, who just happens to have a castle right square in the middle of the area we're interested in."

"A castle?" It was Hawk, skeptical.

"The real McCoy," said the CIA man. "Makes Camelot look like a stage set. It was built in the early part of the century by some millionaire publisher who wanted to get away from it all. There have been several owners since then, but the one who owns it now, the lady we're going to have to be very careful with, is known locally as The Bitch. You'll recognize her real name, I'm sure, when I tell you..."

Nick listened intently, missing nothing, yet in another and independent part of his mind there was the ghost of sardonic laughter. He had but recently finished a brushup course in the newest developments in "electronic intelligence," during which the instructor had made it very clear that the day of the individual human agent was nearly over. The gadgets were fast taking over. Spy satellites were circling the globe at 17,000 miles an hour. An agent could sit with his feet on the desk, nursing a tall drink, and count the ICBMs in Kazakhstan. He could monitor the traffic between the Kremlin and a Russian sub in the Arctic. The magnificent U-2 jets were already obsolete. And, according to some people, so were human beings.

Nick Carter knew better. So did Hawk. The CIA Director was proving it at the very moment. There came a time, inevitably, when the devices and gimmicks were not enough. When there was a specific dirty job to do, usually involving killing or being killed, and then only a human being would suffice. A man. A real blood-and-guts man with muscle and brain to suit the occasion. When the dangers and the difficulties snowballed and assumed the aspect of the unbeatable — only such a man could win.

The CIA man was saying, "You'll go in tonight, Carter. Sort of a wetback in reverse, you might, say. Just remember one thing — from the time you're put ashore until you are picked up you will be strictly on your own. Planning has devised a good heavy cover for you, and it should work, but if it fails and you get into trouble we won't be able to help you. The Mexican Government is not being advised of your presence in their country, so you'll have to avoid the Federal Police as best you can. Above all, if what we suspect is correct, and the Chinese

are involved in this, you must not be made to talk! If you are taken and tortured you must kill yourself before you reach the limit of your endurance. Is that very clear?"

N3's nod was a little curt, his smile a little sour. It was very clear indeed. Wasn't it always? He was probably the best all-round "killer" agent in the world — and nearly as expendable as the guy who cleaned the AXE offices.

Hour after hour the briefing went on, until even Nick's supply of nervous energy began to flag. Hawk became irascible, nearly petulant, insistent on each small detail of preparation. The CIA Director maintained a massive calm — easy enough when it wasn't *his* man that was going in.

It was well after dark when Nick boarded a cutter at a deserted pier. A submarine was waiting for him in the outer harbor. Hawk was with him. The CIA man was already flying back to Washington.

Hawk, dry as an old leaf, held out his hand. *"Buena suerte,* son. Take care."

Nick winked at his boss. "I was just thinking, sir. If I can get my hands on a few million of that lovely counterfeit let's you and I go to Pago-Pago for the rest of our lives. Nothing but gin and brown-skinned maidens under the palms."

"Dream on," said Hawk.

Chapter 4
A Well-Preserved Corpse

The United States submarine *Homer S. Jones* surfaced quietly in a zone where the Bay of California meets the Pacific. *Homer,* as the crew called her, had waited until the moon was down. Now she came awash like a sleek, steel whale and a hatch clanged open. A young lieutenant preceded Nick Carter down the ladder to the wet deck.

"This is it. The men will have the boat ready for you in a minute." The lieutenant peered toward the shore, half a mile away. There were a few lights scattered up and down it, dim beacons of civilization in the gloom.

"We should be dead on target," the lieutenant said. He pointed to his left. "Those lights should be Eldorado. The ones on the right are La Cruz. My orders were to land you between them."

By this time a rubber boat had been lowered into the calm seas lapping at the sub. Nick shook hands with the lieutenant. "Thanks, lieutenant. You've done a fine job. Now let's check out our recovery plan once more."

"Right. We he doggo around the coast here, out beyond the limit, and wait for your beeper signal. Ostensibly we're on a test cruise. We wait two weeks. If we get the beeper signal we come to this same spot and pick you up on the recognition signal. If we don't hear from you in two weeks we go home." The lieutenant did not see fit to mention his private and personal orders: stooge around and see if you can find another submarine in the area. If you do, and she can't identify herself, sink her. Ram her if you must! Those were his secret orders from the Navy and, as far as he knew, had nothing to do with this odd deal of putting a bum ashore on the Mexican coast.

"Okay," said Nick Carter. "Fine. I'll be seeing you, then. Before two weeks, I hope." He went down the deck to where the rubber boat was waiting. The lieutenant noticed again that, although this man looked like a bum, he moved like a tiger. There was something about his eyes, too, which could give a man the creeps. They changed colors, those eyes, but always they were steady and cold on yours when he spoke.

The big man wasted no time. He leaped into the rubber boat, poised and skillful, and pushed away from the sub. He looked back once, raised a hand, and a soft-voiced *adios* came across the water. The lieutenant waved, then turned toward the conning tower. "All hands below. Prepare to submerge."

Killmaster paddled toward the beach, a glittering evanescent

white line in the star glow. Behind him he heard the swish and gurgle as *Homer* submerged, but he did not look back. Overhead the constellations spun and tilted, bright against a black velvet sky. A fine and peaceful evening. But for how long? Killmaster's grin was hard. His job was to disrupt this all-pervading calm, this peaceful land and seascape. He was the grain of sand in the oyster, the irritant that might, or might not, produce the pearl the CIA and AXE were seeking.

The waves were barely thigh high. Nick landed easily and unloaded his little craft. He deflated the boat and buried it and the paddle in the sand. Perhaps some beachcomber would find it and wonder. Would get a few *pesos* for it. It did not matter.

When he had buried the boat and smoothed the sand, Nick picked up the heavy musette bag and slung it on his back. It contained the worldly possessions of Jamie McPherson, his cover identity. He had a tattered, stained *turista* card in that name, and also a bedraggled passport, both badly out of date. The passport had been cleverly aged and sweat stained until it was barely decipherable.

Nick reached a line of low dunes and slogged up them, sinking in the drifts to the tops of his high-laced shoes, both of which had holes in the soles. He had no illusions about what would happen if the Mexican police got him. A jail cell. And Mexico is not famous for its prisons, nor for its treatment of prisoners. The police must not get him. And he did not want to kill any policemen if it could be helped.

He left the beach and plunged into thick scrub, stunted sea pines and tall saw grass and maguey plants. Presently he came to the highway, a black double-laned ribbon stretching north and south. The roadway brooded, silent and deserted, with no hint that a car had ever passed over it, or ever would. Nick crossed the road and flopped into the ditch for a breather. Only ten minutes, he told himself. He must be well inland, near the tiny village of Cosala, before the sun came up. He lit a cigarette, not his gold tips now, but the cheapest of Mexican, and inhaled the harsh smoke and considered. The mission was well enough begun. His cover should prove adequate — if he could stay out of the hands of the Mexican police. If they got him, the cover would actually work against him — he was in Mexico illegally, for one thing, and he was a drifter, sort of a bindle stiff, a "gold tramp" who was panning illegally. The day of the free-lance gold hunter was long past in Mexico. One had to have a license and you had to split the take with the government. Nick had no license and he could hardly split a non-existent take. He didn't think he would have much time to devote to actual panning. Yet he must make it look good, set up a crude camp and pretend to be looking for gold.

His clothing, Killmaster admitted now, was a thing of beauty from the AXE viewpoint. He looked exactly as he was supposed to look — a

down and outer trying to pan enough gold for a new stake, a new try at life. His hat, battered, stained and torn, was an old Army campaign hat such as American soldiers had worn when they chased Villa across the Rio Grande. God only knew how the CIA had come up with it!

His shirt was Army, too, out of surplus, and he wore ragged corduroys tucked into the high boots. Beneath these he wore a dirty singlet and a pair of filthy long johns. His socks had holes in them and stank, though he did have a fresh pair in the musette bag. Also in the musette bag were a pair of high-powered binoculars — they would take some explaining if the police got him — and an ancient Webley revolver made before the first World War. It was a huge gun, heavy and awkward — Hawk had suggested that it needed wheels — and he had only a few spare rounds for it, but it was the sort of gun that a man like Jamie McPherson might carry. Nick had admitted, rather reluctantly, that his Luger would be out of place. As would have his stiletto, Hugo, and the deadly little gas bomb, Pierre. He felt a little naked without his old companions, but the CIA had insisted that he go in "clean" and Hawk and he had had to defer in the end.

His beard, which was black and coarse when he let it grow, was already itching. Nick scratched it a moment, then picked up the musette bag and climbed out of the ditch. It would be light now in four hours or so and he must make the most of the darkness. He got his bearings, plunged into a little copse of ash trees, and began to climb a long ridge that would lead him into the foothills of the Sierra Madre Occidental where it pushed down into Durango.

Nick maintained a steady, rapid pace to the east. Always climbing. He crossed one secondary road and beyond it the country got wilder, the terrain slashed with deep ravines and steep cliffs and long glissades of shale. As a line of pearl began to show in the east he saw traces of mining, old shafts gaping like blackened teeth in the cliff faces, a mountain stream where a rotten flume was falling apart. Several times he passed cabins and shacks, all lonely and sagging and rotting away, but he did not stop. But the shacks gave him an idea. Nick Carter was not one to sleep on hard barren ground if he could help it.

He had been told there was a mild rainy season in this part of Mexico at this time of year. Now his information proved correct. Misty gray and white clouds gathered quickly, ignoring the golden rim of sun pushing up in the east, and soon a warm silvery shower was falling. Nick trudged on, enjoying the soft damp drops on his face.

He came suddenly to a cliff overhang. Below him was a long, narrow valley, a lush green *barranca* gouged out of the hills. He sensed immediately that it was what he sought. He eased off the musette bag and sat down, his boots dangling over the cliff edge, and studied the

ground below. A narrow stream ran gushing and hurrying along the floor of the valley, spewing itself around boulders and rock formations in a white frenzy. Should be good panning there, Nick told himself.

He glanced about him, his sharp eyes missing nothing. Off to his right, near where the valley began, was a mountain with a flat, rock-strewn summit. It would, he thought, overlook everything in the vicinity. From it, in the shelter of the rocks, he should be able to see the coast and as far again inland. He would have the same vantage north and south. While on the valley floor he would be safe from other prying eyes. Yes. This was it.

Nick began to skirt the edge of the cliff, looking for a way to get down without breaking his neck. It was not going to be easy. The cliffs on his side of the valley were precipitous, falling away nearly sheer to a depth of two hundred feet in places. Had he approached the *barranca* from the other side it would have been easier; there the valley floor sloped up at an easy forty-five degrees to merge into a tree-studded mesa. Nick cursed under his breath. All very fine — but he wasn't on the other side!

The cliff angled sharply just then and he saw the bridge. He approached it and regarded it with some distaste. Neither Hawk nor the CIA would appreciate it much if he got his brains bashed out on the bottom of the gorge. A dead agent isn't much good. Nick tested the end of the bridge with one foot, which action immediately set the frail structure to swaying.

It was, Killmaster thought, the sort of bridge you saw in movies about adventure in the high Andes. It was narrow, with passage for only one, and drooped perilously in the middle. The floor was of wide-spaced boards interlaced with wire cable. There was a hand rope on either side, connected here and there to the floor by wooden stanchions.

A sudden gust of wind whirled down the *barranca* and the little bridge danced like a dervish. Nick said to hell with it and stepped out. The bridge swayed, plunged, bucked and swung beneath his two hundred odd pounds, but it did not break. He was sweating when he reached the far side, and his beard was itching fiercely. But when at last he reached the floor of the valley he was content. It was the perfect spot.

At this, the lower end of the *barranca*, the rushing stream had been dammed. Rotting balks and ruined planks were all that was left of a sluiceway, evidence that the spot had once been placer-mined. The sizeable pond was drained by a break in the middle of the crude dam. The pond itself looked a cool inviting green and appeared to be deep. Nick promised himself a dip as soon as he was settled in.

Snugged back against the cliff face was a rusting little Nissen hut,

nearly hidden in a clump of red cedar and primavera. Nick contemplated it with quiet satisfaction. It was rusted through in several places and the door had unaccountably vanished, but it would do very well. There was an air of desuetude about the whole place that entirely suited him. He wanted, for the time being, to be very much alone. When the time came he might have to show himself deliberately, if only to draw fire, but not yet.

He stepped under the rusty carapace of the hut. The rain had ceased now and the sun drove mote-filled shafts through the holes in the roof. It was barren except for three bunks end-to-end along one wall and an ancient Sibley stove in one corner. The stove lacked a pipe, though the hole was there for it. As Nick went to inspect the stove at close hand there was a scampering and rustling and three lizards scuttled for the door.

"Sorry, fellows," Nick muttered. "The apartment situation is bad all over." But the lizards started him thinking and he began to hunt the hut thoroughly. He bagged three scorpions, deadly enough, and one gila monster found under a rotting floor plank. Nick brushed the scorpions out of the door with a stick and killed the gila monster with the little folding shovel he had brought along.

When he had rid his new home of pests he went back to the Sibley stove. It was full to the brim with black, greasy ashes. Nick picked up a handful and sifted them through his fingers. A look of intense concentration came over the handsome, fine-boned face as he stared down at the ashes for a long time. Either the nerves in his fingertips were kidding him or the ashes were still faintly warm!

Killmaster knew that thickly packed ashes, in a protected place, will hold their warmth for a long time. Two days? Three?

He tossed his musette bag on one of the bare board bunks and unpacked. He checked the outsize Webley and thrust it into his belt. He had never fired a Webley and doubted he could hit a barn with it, even inside the barn, but in a visual sense the weapon was formidable. A miniature cannon. Probably sounded like one, too.

From the bag he also took a shallow pan with a fine wire-sieve bottom, with which he intended to play at panning gold. Something of an improvement over the "pan" the old timers had used.

Before he got down to work he stood near the door; He did not move a muscle and a watcher could not have detected his breathing. He might have been a phantom haunting the shadowed little hut. Outside the hut he could see and hear life returning to normal — squirrels were chittering again and birds darted and sang in the green cage of trees surrounding the hut. Nick was reassured. There was nothing, no one, out there now. No creature who did not belong.

Killmaster went back to the stove and set to work. He filled the

pan with greasy ashes and began to sift them. As he dug deeper into the sooty mass he knew he had been right. They *were* still warm. Just what that meant he did not concern himself with at the moment, though well aware of the implications. His privacy might be disturbed at any time.

When he finished he had a mass of ashes on the floor and three more or less interesting exhibits. They would have been more interesting if he could have made any sense out of them.

A — the charred remains of a man's wallet.

B — one corner of a passport, with only part of a visa stamp visible.

C — a blackened piece of silver money which, when cleaned, turned out to be a 5 *cruzeiro* bit. Brazilian money.

The rest was ashes. Mute and unrevealing, though he thought he detected fibers in the stuff. Burnt clothing?

His hands and arms were a mass of sticky filth by now. Nick placed his three finds on another bunk, then took his canteen and sauntered down to the pond. He dropped a Vioformo tablet into the canteen and filled it, then stood contemplating the pond. And succumbed to temptation. If he was being watched, which was quite possible, it would be well in character for a filthy "gold tramp" to take a bath.

Killmaster stripped rapidly, chuckling to himself as he got down to the cruddy long johns. If there was a watcher he must be amused at the sight. Even so magnificent a physical specimen as Nick must appear slightly comic in the baggy-kneed drawers.

He went into the pond in a long flat dive, finding the water just cold enough to be bracing. He swam back and forth a dozen times in a beautiful, all-out racing crawl, then sounded for bottom. As he had suspected the pond was deep. A good twenty feet or more. He grabbed a handful of bottom and surfaced. While treading water he examined the specimen of bottom he had brought up, washing the mud, sand and gravel gently through his fingers. A few tiny specks of color remained in his palm. There was still a little gold around, then. Not enough to make commercial mining feasible, but an itinerant such as he was supposed to be could possibly make twenty or thirty dollars a day. So much the better for his cover. Especially as he did not have the problem of smuggling his gold out of Mexico.

Nick swam around the pond for a time, basking in the cool water and hot sun, and then sounded again. It had been a long time since he had really tested his lungs. The last time he had done just over four minutes, but underwater stamina depended on practice and exercises and he was behind in both. He hit bottom and began to stooge around idly, peering back at a couple of small fish and giving chase to a large

and startled turtle.

His lungs were just beginning to pain a bit when he saw it. A stray shaft of sunlight had somehow tunneled down through the turgid green, just enough to strike a glimmer of white on the thing lying on the bottom. Nick swam toward it. It was the body of a man, naked, with arms and legs bound with wire. Around the- dead man's waist was a rope which in turn was attached to a burlap bag full of stones. Someone had wanted to be very sure the dead would not rise again.

Pain stabbed his lungs and he had to surface. He took ten deep breaths and went down again, this time with his hunting knife. An extremely delicate electronic device was concealed in the hilt, but the Brain Boys had assured him it was waterproof.

Nick cut the rope and freed the body from its burden of stones. He brought it to the surface and towed it to shore and pulled it out on the bank. He stood dripping in the sun, his tanned pelt shining, feeling himself vibrant and alive as he gazed down at the dead flesh.

The body was that of a man in his mid-fifties. Strands of pale blond hair were plastered across the bald skull. The eyes, protuberant and staring at Nick, were a light blue. He had been a rather short man, squat and powerful, with well-developed biceps. He had been badly in need of a shave when he was killed. And he had been well killed. His chest was riddled with small blue holes. Someone, Nick guessed, had put nearly the whole of a Tommy gun clip into him.

Killmaster squatted by the corpse and went over the flesh, inanimate leather now, inch by inch. He found the tattoo immediately. It was on the left arm, high on the outside, just below the bulge of the bicep. A tattoo in the shape of twin blue lightning bolts. The infamous double lightning of the SS!

Nick sat back on his heels and whistled softly. *Schutzstaffel.* Hitler's elite. As nasty a gang of perverts, criminals and murderers as ever roamed the earth. They were still being hunted down like the rats they were, but many were still at large, scurrying frantically from hole to hole. Most had had the twin lightning tattoo torn from their flesh. This one, this dead man now staring up at him, had been one of the arrogant ones.

Nick got his entrenching shovel and dug a shallow grave. He tumbled the body into it and covered it over, patting the earth flat. He did not want his pond contaminated with a cadaver.

He dressed, jammed the hunting knife into his boot, and went back to the hut. He picked up the *cruzeiro* piece and examined it again. There was an awful lot of coffee in Brazil. There were also, it was rumored, an awful lot of ex-Nazis. Nick flipped the coin high and caught it again. Whoever had killed the man and burnt all his clothes

and possessions, had missed the coin. Now it tattled a fragment of story. What the full story was Killmaster could not guess. Probably it did not concern him or his mission. Almost certainly it did not. And yet — someone had killed a Nazi, an SS man, and buried the body where they hoped it would never be found. That in itself was of no matter. What did matter was that the ashes had still been warm!

Nick conceded, reluctantly, that he was probably not as alone as he had hoped. Still he must play out his part according to plan.

He slung the binoculars around his neck inside his shirt. Then, with the big Webley in his belt, he took a can of beans from the musette bag and ate them under a fir tree. He dug himself a small latrine back in the grove of primavera and used it, then flung the empty tin in and covered both it and the excreta. Then, with his little shovel and the pan, he began working his way back up the stream toward the far end of the *barranca*. He had, or hoped he had, the appearance of a *gringo* stiff looking for a good place to pan some illegal gold.

He found a shallow spot where the stream ran crashing around huge boulders and crossed over. He stopped to pan here and there, always working his way upstream. Now and then he found specks of gold in the pan, and these he carefully stowed away in a leather pouch. If the Mexican cops did get him he must have something to prove that he was a bona-fide gold tramp. If Authority was in a good mood they might do no worse than kick him out of the country. That in itself, of course, meant defeat. He would go back to AXE with his tail between his legs. N3's regular features took on a saturnine cast at the thought. That had never happened to him. He didn't think it was going to happen this time.

He spent the entire afternoon play-acting. The sun was lowering in the west, the sky riven with rainbow color, when he found what he wanted at the end of the *barranca.* It came very near to being a dead end, a box canyon, but at last he found a steep passage, as narrow and treacherous as a winze in an old mine, which led out of the ravine on the easy side. He left his pan and shovel by the stream and slipped through the narrow winze, slipping badly on the shale floor. The passage ended in a tumble of giant boulders not far from the mesa he had seen before. To his right, half a mile away, was the flat-topped mountain. A belt of trees and heavy brush strayed in a wavering line from the mesa to the foot of the mountain. Cover enough, he reckoned, for a man who knew how to use cover. And he did. The main thing was to get to the point of vantage before the light went.

The sun was half-drowned in the Pacific when Nick Carter reached the mountain top. He had been right — it overlooked everything for miles. He found a niche in the boulders and adjusted

the binoculars.

To his right, the northeast, was the tiny village of Cosala glimmering white in the twilight. He must go there in the morning, to be seen, noticed, and to get supplies. He did not think there would be a resident policeman in so small a village.

Nick brought the glasses around slowly, counter-clockwise, sweeping the broken landscape. Here and there he spotted the gaping maws of old mine shafts, tottering stipples and derricks, all rotting away now. From one of the mining sites a rusting narrow-gauge track ran away to nowhere. Near it a donkey engine stood mute.

Suddenly Killmaster let out a grunt of satisfaction. There it was. The airstrip. The strip the CIA was betting was the one from which the drunken Vargas had taken off with his load of counterfeit. Nick examined it carefully. It was weedy and overgrown, unkempt, but he could clearly see tracks where a plane, or planes, had recently landed and taken off. At one end a wind sock lifted erratically to the evening sea breeze. There was a metal hangar and a tiny operations shack built of raw yellow wood, unpainted. Everything about it gave the impression of desolation and desertion.

A rutted track led from the airstrip to the double-laned highway he had crossed that morning. Nick adjusted the glasses again and followed the black ribbon of highway to the north, to where a dirt road shot off to the left to end at a high wire gate. There was a small stone guardhouse just inside the gate.

He put down the glasses to light a cigarette, Mex, and when he took them up again he saw a car just coming into sight on the highway. It was a sleek, expensive car, and its shiny black hide flaunted the last rays of the sun. Nick nodded in appreciation. A Rolls. Such a car could only belong to the owner of the castle known as *El Mirador*. The Watch Tower. That quite famous and extraordinary woman who was known locally as The Bitch.

Nick let his cigarette loll from the corner of his lips as he kept the glasses on the car. Possibly the lady had been out hanging some of the peasants, or at least whipping them. She was, if rumor was true, quite capable of both.

His orders had been specific on the subject of the lady and her famous castle. Stay clear! She was VIP. Not to be bothered. Unless in the very unlikely event that she was in some way mixed up with the counterfeiting and the Serpent Party. The CIA Director had all but stated that Gerda von Rothe, her real name, was above suspicion. He had not gone quite that far, but the implication was there.

Now, as Nick Carter followed the Rolls with his glasses, his grin was on the knowing side. Nobody was above suspicion! That was the creed of AXE, and of Hawk, and it was his creed too.

He thought he detected a flash of silver hair as the Rolls turned off the highway onto the dirt road that led back to the castle. Was the lady a platinum-blonde? Surely the CIA man had told him, though there had been no pictures immediately available. Nick shrugged. Odd that he couldn't remember. Not that it mattered — if the lady was as clean as the CIA seemed to think.

The Rolls was stopping at the gate now. Two uniformed guards came out of the guardhouse and opened the gate. Nick smiled as he watched them salute in military fashion. The Bitch ran a tight castle.

The Rolls went through the gate and up a long, curving drive that wound into thick growing trees. Nick lost sight of it and brought the glasses back to the uniformed guards. Silver insignia of some kind glittered on their caps. They did not wear badges. Both men wore Sam Browne belts that looked well polished, and both wore buttoned-down holsters on their belts. Nick's brow furrowed in thought — what was the lady so afraid of? His frown deepened a moment later as one of the guards went into the guardhouse and came out again with a submachine gun. He sat in a chair leaning against the side of the guardhouse and began to clean the gun with rags and oil. So powerful were the glasses that Nick could see the man's flat, expressionless face, see the lips move as he whistled at his work.

What in hell, Nick was wondering, goes on at the castle? Tommy guns! Miles of wire fence topped with strands of barbs. That's security, all right, but why so much of it? What has the lady got to hide?

Trees prevented him from seeing much of the castle itself, this fabulous *El Mirador* so often pictured and written about. Formerly, anyway. Nick could definitely remember the CIA man saying that not much had been written about the castle in recent years. Writers and photographers were no longer welcome. The Bitch lived alone among her splendor and her millions and liked it.

What he could see of the castle reminded him of a fairy tale castle he had once seen on the Rhine. He could see turrets and castellated towers and a single line of ramparts with bartizans overlooking an invisible moat. From the tallest tower, a long spire of an affair, there floated a large pennon. As the breeze snapped it taut Nick could make out the device — a single white lily emblazoned against scarlet. He could not repress a smile at the incongruity of the scene. Splendor, even grandeur in this setting, wedded to commercialism. The White Lily. Symbolic of White Lily cosmetics! Millions of jars of goo purchased annually by women all over the world. Women who hoped the white paste would make them as beautiful as Gerda von Rothe. Known locally as The Bitch.

Nick laughed softly and shook his head. It was a mad world. But The Bitch and her castle and her cosmetic products had nothing to do

with his mission. She had millions, so no need for her to counterfeit. And a woman like that was not likely to mix in Mexican politics. No. It was chance, nothing more, that The Bitch and her castle happened to be squarely in the middle of things. Of the immense area he had to explore.

And yet — the plane had come from that airstrip. The airstrip belonged to the lady and so, as far as the Mexican police knew, did the Beechcraft. Vargas had been employed as a pilot by the lady. That was all the Mexican police had known.

Nick smiled. Of course they might have been a little more interested if the CIA had told them about the two bags of counterfeit found in the plane. But the CIA had not told them about it. They had sat on that, and simply reported the crash of a Mexican national in a stolen plane.

It was verging into darkness now, but not too dark for the gunner to see him. The bullet splatted off a boulder just to the left of Nick and went caterwauling around in frantic ricochet.

Nick flattened out and tried to dig himself into solid rock. We are not alone, he thought with a complete lack of piety. Goddamn it — we are not alone! With the Webley in his hand he wriggled sideways like a snake into the shelter of an overhanging rock and waited for the next bullet.

Chapter 5
The Bitch

In the dead quiet that followed, Nick thought he heard a mocking laugh somewhere out in the gloom. He was not really sure — it might have been a trick of echo or the play of his imagination. In any case it did not come again. Nor was he shot at again. There was nothing but silence and the falling dark and the night cries of small birds. He lay unmoving, scarcely breathing in the shelter of his rocks, thinking furiously all the while. Since he was now on the highest point of land for miles around the shot had come from below, from one of the innumerable gullies and ravines and rock forts that covered the area. It was made-to-order ambush country.

And yet the gunner had missed! Granted that shooting uphill was tricky at any time, especially in crepuscular light, still he wondered. Had the gunner tried again, had he tried to hold Nick with a volley, the matter would have been clear. But there had been only one shot. That and the mocking laugh — had he really heard it?

The alternative was that someone was having fun and games with him; he had been warned, put on notice that he was being watched. By whom? The bandits mentioned by the CIA Director? Minions of The Bitch? Members of the Serpent Party? Friends of the ex-Nazi he had only just buried? Nick shrugged and with some effort extricated himself from the mental tangle. It would work itself out in time. Things always did.

For an hour he lay unmoving. A sidewinder twitched past without seeing him. Finally he made his way back to the *barranca,* his eyes a luminous amber now as he made his way easily through the dark along a trail he had only traveled once.

Nothing in or around the hut had been disturbed. There were no traces of visitors. Working in the dark, Nick cut some cedar branches and, with the musette bag, arranged them to look like a man sleeping on the bunk. He covered them with his only blanket.

The moon was pushing one golden horn above the blunted teeth of the sierra to the east when he snaked out of the hut and took up lodgings for the night in the low branches of a piñon pine and settled down for the vigil.

It proved a waste of time. His only visitor was a cougar. The big cat came softly out of the trees beyond the pond, on stealthy velvet paws, then paused as it caught the man-scent. With a flash of saffron in the moonlight it was gone.

As dawn seeped over the peaks in pale effulgence, Nick went to

sleep, clinging to his branch. When he awoke the sun was three hours high. He climbed down, swearing at his stiffness and feeling just a bit the fool. Still it had been necessary to take the precaution. He bathed his face in the pool, then with the Webley in his belt and concealed by his shirt, he skirted the pond and climbed to the mesa. Descending on the far side he found a path that led toward the tiny village of Cosala. He followed it at an easy pace. He was gambling there would be no police in the village, and a visit for supplies would aid in establishing his role as a gold tramp. It might also, he thought rather grimly, provide some sort of reaction — other than shooting at him — from those who were watching him. N3's frown, as he trudged along, had something of puzzlement in it. The CIA man had assured him that he did not have to worry about the *bandidos.* Nick wondered now how the CIA could be so sure. Did they have some sort of private deal cooked up with El Tigre and his band of cutthroats? Somewhere in the back of his mind Nick was beginning to feel the first prick of apprehension. Was this going to turn out to be a case of the left hand not knowing what the right hand was doing? Another Bay of Pigs on a lesser scale? He knew damned well that the CIA hadn't told him everything. They never did!

Still there was his own job to do, no matter what the obstacles; he was responsible to Hawk and AXE and had to get on with it. Yet, as he entered the village, the vague feeling of impending snafu would not go away.

It was a dismal little village, typical of the poverty and inertia the Serpent Party was trying to exploit. Nick Carter, rather an apolitical type, could see instantly that this could be made a fertile breeding ground for communism. It would, of course, be called by another name. The Chinese Reds were very far from being fools.

There was a single, mean street lined with tumble-down adobe houses. An open gutter, crammed with filth, ran down the center of the street. The smell and aspect of poverty was everywhere, hanging over the village like a miasma, attaching itself to the few peasants who shuffled past him without the usual friendly greeting that one receives in Mexico. Nick was aware of the furtive glances as he kept alert for any sign of a policeman. The villagers, of course, would know instantly what he was. A gold bum. As sullen and unfriendly as they were, he doubted any of them would turn him in to the Federal authorities; people like these were not usually on good terms with the police.

At the far end of the street he found a shabby *cantina* lit by candles and guttering oil lamp. No electricity in the village, of course. Nor any running water. That would have to be fetched from a single communal pump. As Nick rapped on the bar for service — there was

no one in attendance — he could not help making the stark comparison between this village and Acapulco. They were two different worlds. Granted that this was one of the poorer provinces, and that the Mexican Government was doing everything in its power, yet these people were still living in ignorance, poverty and desperation. None of their country's many bloody revolutions had availed for them. So it was here, and in the other places like it, that the Serpent Party was winning seats in the Chamber of Deputies and even in the Senate. It was weak as yet, the Party, but it was on the march. And financed, according to both the AXE and CIA experts, by the proceeds of the counterfeit that was playing hell with the American economy. Clever bastards, these Chinese!

Nick rapped on the bar again. The service was lousy, too. He studied a faded poster over the back bar, a garish advertisement for beer. A pariah dog the color of diluted mustard, skinny and trembling, slunk through the door to cower beneath a table. Somehow the sight of the miserable dog triggered the growing irritation in Nick. He slammed his fist down on the bar. "Goddamn it! Is anyone here?"

An old man, wrinkled and bent, the joints of his fingers grotesquely swollen, shuffled from a back room. "I am sorry, Señor. I did not hear you at first. My granddaughter, the little one, she died this morning and we must make ready the funeral. You wish, Señor?"

"*Tequila, por favor.* And I am sorry about your granddaughter. Of what did she die?"

The old man put a dirty glass and half a bottle of cheap tequila before Nick. He pushed forward salt, half a lemon and a plate of shriveled mango slices. Nick poured the *tequila* and drank, ignoring the lemon — it looked sick — but using the salt. The old man stared at him with apathy until Nick repeated his question, then he hunched his shoulders and spread his hands in the age-old gesture of defeat.

"Of the fever, Señor. Of the typhoid. There is much of it around here. Some say it is the well, from which all must drink."

Nick poured himself another shot of tequila. "Don't you have a doctor in the village?" Stupid question!

The old man shook his head. "No doctor, Señor. We are too poor. None will stay in our village. The Government has promised us a doctor, and serum, but it does not come. The doctor does not come. So our children die."

There was a long silence broken only by the buzzing of flies. The *cantina* was full of them. Nick said: "Is there a policeman in the village?"

The old man gave him a shrewd look. "No police, Señor. They do not bother with us. Or we with them. We spit on the police!"

Nick was about to reply when he heard the sound of an expensive

motor in the street. He went to the door and, keeping out of sight, peered out. It was the Rolls Royce he had seen last evening through the binoculars. There was no flash of silver hair this time. Whatever the purpose of the Rolls in this remote little village, evidently the lady was not involved.

The car was driven by a short, sturdy little man who looked like a *mestizo* or, to N3's experienced eye, a Chinese trying to pass as a *mestizo*. In the circumstances, Nick thought, it could well be. He watched with interest as the Rolls stopped a little way past the *cantina* and the driver got out. He was wearing slacks and a garish sport shirt and a pair of blue sneakers. He walked with a bouncing spring in his step, giving the impression of squat muscularity, of a powerful coiled spring. Judo man, thought the AXE agent. Karate, too, probably. He filed the thought away.

The man was carrying a small hammer and a large, rolled-up sheet of paper. He went to the blank, windowless side of a deserted adobe house and nailed up a poster, taking the nails from his mouth and banging them in with rapid strokes. Nick could not make out the words but the emblem of the serpent was clear enough. The golden serpent with its tail in its mouth, the same as the bracelet he had been shown.

Another man put his head out of the rear window of the Rolls and said something to the *mestizo*. The man was wearing a white, snap-brim panama, but Nick caught a good look at the face. It was pink, well nourished, running a bit to jowl. A porcine face that he had seen not many hours ago in a glossy photo in San Diego. The man's name was Maxwell Harper and he was head of a large public relations firm in Los Angeles. It was he who handled The Bitch's cosmetic account.

Harper was also in charge of publicity for the Serpent Party, hence the CIA's somewhat cursory interest in him. The man was doing nothing illegal, as the Director had taken pains to point out. He was properly registered with the Mexican Government and had been given a professional work permit. He was being paid openly by the Serpent Party to promote their campaign. Even so, an eye was to be kept on him. Nick had gathered, from what the Director had *not* said, that the CIA had a vague uneasiness about Maxwell Harper.

The *mestizo* finished hammering up the poster and went back to the car. Instead of sliding beneath the wheel he took another roll of paper from the front seat, said something to Harper, and started for the *cantina*.

Nick turned and headed for the back of the *cantina*. As he passed the bar he held up a twenty peso note and put his finger to his lips. The old man nodded. Nick slipped through the door into the back room. He closed the door but for the barest crack and stood listening.

His eyes, roving the poor barren room, fell upon the tiny coffin on a pair of trestles. The child in it was dressed in a white frock. Her small hands were crossed on her breast. She looked like a brown rubber doll laid to rest for the moment.

A spate of Spanish, heavily laced with the dialect of the province, came from the bar. Nick put his eye to the crack. The *mestizo* was having a drink and haranguing the old man. He had spread the poster on the bar and weighted it with beer bottles. He jabbed a blunt finger at the lettering and kept talking. The old man listened in a sullen silence, nodding now and then. At last the *mestizo* shoved a small packet of peso notes at the old man, pointed to a wall of the *cantina,* and left. Nick waited until he heard the soft vanishing purr of the Rolls, then he went back to the bar. The old man was reading the poster, moving his lips.

"They promise much," he told Nick. "The Serpents — but they will do nothing. Like all the others."

Nick scanned the lettering. It wasn't too bad, he admitted. Not exactly subtle, certainly not honest, but done with cunning. That would be Maxwell Harper's hand. Public relations writing, American style. Every promise was qualified, but in such a way that the ignorant, the unlettered, would never notice it.

He had a last shot of tequila and shoved a five-thousand peso note at the old man. "For the *muchacha,"* Nick said. He nodded toward the back room. "For a stone, perhaps. And I am sorry, old man. Very sorry."

At the door he halted and looked back. The old man was fingering the money. A single silver tear exuded from the rheumy eyes and crept down his dark cheek, tracing a light path in the dirt. *"Muchas gracias,* Señor. You are a good man."

A thought struck Nick. "The child," he said gently. "Why didn't you take her up to the castle, to the place they call *El Mirador?* Surely they would have helped you? I hear the woman who owns it is very wealthy."

The old man stared at him for a long moment. Then he spat. "We did take her, Señor. We begged for help. I myself, in person, wept. I got on my knees. We were turned away at the gate." He spat again. "*La Perra!* The Bitch! She helps no one."

Nick Carter found this hard to believe. Bitch she might be, still she was a woman. And a woman and a sick child — "Perhaps it was the fault of the guards," he began, but the old man interrupted him. "They called the castle on their telephone, Señor. I myself heard them speaking to the woman. To *La Perra.* She would do nothing. She called us beggars and ordered the guards to drive us away."

Nick went down the mean street to a small *bodega* to which the

old man had directed him. It was a poor setup, with everything in scant supply, but he managed to buy some canned food, two blankets and a tiny mange-ridden burro, called Jake. He paid, loaded his supplies on Jake and headed back for the *barranca.* No one paid him the slightest attention as he left the village. There was no sign of the Rolls.

He spent the rest of the afternoon panning up and down the stream and accumulated a pinch or two of dust. He was not going to get rich.

It was hot and dry with a sky of glaring blue dotted here and there with miniature fleece. Around four he knocked off panning and took a dip in the pond. He left his clothes close to the water, with the big Webley on top of them. He dove deep and swam around as he had the day before, but found nothing of interest. He did not really expect to find another body.

This time he stayed down just a few seconds over four minutes. It was time enough for her to approach the pond without Nick's hearing the hoof beats. When he surfaced, blowing and sputtering, she was sitting there on a magnificent palomino, staring at him. The Luger in her hand was rock-steady. Just behind the Palomino, flattened on their bellies, were two enormous Dobermans, their scarlet tongues lolling slant-wise from the wickedly fanged mouths.

The man and woman stared at each other for a moment. The woman spoke first, in German. *"Der Tag kommt?"*

Nick Carter's brain raced like a computer. It was half of a recognition signal and he knew it, but he did not have the countersign. That this was The Bitch he knew instantly; he also guessed that her visit was somehow tied in with the dead man he had found, but he could not take advantage of his knowledge. There was nothing to do but play it cool and straight. He let just a hint of servility creep into his manner. He gave her a tentative smile.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I don't speak German. Just English. That was German, I guess?"

He saw a flicker of disappointment in the narrowed green eyes. She was a tall woman with enormous firm breasts and an incredibly small waist. Her hair was fine-spun silver, a Medusan mane flowing below her shoulders and caught with a golden brooch. Her magnificent skin had a tawny glow about it. Knowing what he did about her — which he must pretend not to know — Nick Carter was impressed, tremendously impressed. This woman, Bitch though she might be, was a legend in her own time.

The Luger moved in her hand as though it had a life of its own. He knew that if the whim took her she would murder him then and there.

She spoke again. “The word Siegfried means nothing to you?”

“No, ma’am. Should it?” Nick tried to look abashed and uneasy. At the moment it was not difficult, standing naked as he was in water to his waist.

The green eyes roved from Nick to his pile of clothing, taking in the Webley, then traversing on around the pond and the clearing and the hut. She was missing nothing. The eyes came back to Nick. “What do you do here?”

Nick shrugged and said, “Just trying to make a living, ma’am. Get a little stake, is all. I’m figuring on panning ’til I get me enough gold, then go back to the States.”

As though the thought had just struck him he added, “You own this land, ma’am? Am I trespassing? If I am I’m sorry. I didn’t know. I’ll move right on, ma’am, if you say so.”

“I don’t actually own the land,” she said. She was carrying a crop in her left hand and she tapped a thigh, swelling round and voluptuous in pink jodhpurs. Tap — tap — tap — there was impatience and arrogance in the act. “I don’t own it,” she repeated, “but I run it. I say who pans gold around here and who does not. I could have you jailed, or hanged for that matter if I choose. Or I can shoot you now. I doubt anyone would miss you.”

Humbly, with the best hangdog look he could summon, Nick said, “I doubt they would, ma’am.”

The palomino began to fret, dancing on slender legs, switching its flaxen tail at the flies tormenting it. The woman jerked savagely at the bit, reining the animal in cruelly. “Be quiet, you bastard!” Her green eyes never left Nick, nor did the Luger take its cold black stare away from his belly.

“You are all alone?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You have seen no one else? Another man? He would be older than you, nearly bald, but a powerfully built man. You have seen such a man?”

I sure have, thought Nick. He’s buried about twenty feet away. He said: “No, ma’am. I ain’t seen anybody. But I only been here since yesterday. Please, ma’am, can I come out now? It’s cold in here.”

She ignored that and asked him, “What is your name?”

“Jamie McPherson, ma’am.”

“You are in Mexico legally? You have proper papers?”

Now Nick allowed himself to become more at ease. He was playing it strictly by ear, but he thought he could get away with acting as though the tension had eased a bit. After all she hadn’t shot him yet, and he must not overplay his hand. Not appear too stupid, too servile, or she would never give him an opportunity to take the place

of the dead man. Which was precisely what N3 had in mind. He knew he was anticipating wildly, but sometimes these crazy gambles came off.

So he said, slyly, “Well, ma’am, I wouldn’t say I’m exactly legal. I got papers, all right, but they’re maybe a little out of date. Maybe a lot out of date.”

For the first time a hint of a smile touched the wide scarlet mouth. Her teeth were large and a dazzling white. Nick wondered, considering what he knew to be her true age, if they were her own. That would be another miracle.

The Luger moved curtly. “Get out,” she commanded. “Get dressed. I want to see your papers. Then perhaps we will talk.”

Nick Carter stared at this silver-haired Valkyrie with an astonishment that was not altogether feigned. “But, ma’am — I mean, well, I ain’t got any clothes on!”

The Luger stared at him. “Get out, I said. I have seen naked men before. Many of them. You are of tremendous build from the waist up — I wish to see the rest of you.” It was said with a natural air of command, with the perfect candor of one who is above the petty conventions.

Nick shrugged and climbed the slippery bank. The Old Man, Hawk, was never going to believe this. He hardly believed it himself.

As he left the water the two Dobermans bristled and showed their fangs. The woman leaned from her saddle to slash at them with the riding crop, but the pistol did not leave its target: Nick’s thick-muscled belly.

“Be quiet,” she ordered the dogs. “Damon, Pythias, down both of you!” The dogs sank back on their haunches, quivering, eyeing Nick meanly. Surely a misnamed pair of brutes, he thought, showing no recognition of the classical names. An uneducated bum like him wouldn’t know about Damon and Pythias.

He walked toward his clothes. “Do not pick up the gun,” she ordered. “Kick it over in my direction.”

Nick nudged the Webley toward her with his big toe. She swung easily from the saddle and picked it up. Her ease of movement reminded Nick of the cougar he had seen last night. He reached for his clothes.

“Do not dress yet. Stand up and turn around. Slowly.” There was a new note in her voice.

Slowly, with the sun hot on his naked flesh, Nick turned to face her. Slowly, very slowly, the green eyes began at his feet and crept upward. They lingered for a long time on his loins and Nick felt himself beginning to react. He tried to stop it, to fight back the surging tumescence, but to no avail. Slowly, inexorably, he continued

to react to her avid stare. He saw her moisten her lips with a flick of her tongue. The green eyes were narrowed on him, on his flesh, and for a moment the golden mask of her face seemed to melt, to don and discard a series of new masks in rapid succession. The AXEman felt a growing excitement in himself, quite apart from the physical urge that was tinning him into a stud on display. He studied her face, with its arrogant slightly hooked nose over the wide slash of mouth, and in that face he read the permutations of passion — this was a woman who could slip from wild ferocity to dulcet murmurs of acquiescence; this woman was capable of — it was written plain on the features — of cruelty, perversion, erotic phantasmagoria beyond the wildest dreaming of sane people — he doubted she was sane in the ordinary sense — of phallic worship performed to the devil's mass. At her age, he thought, she must have seen, had indeed experienced, everything that man and woman can do together, plus many things that were artificial and unnatural. Still she was not satiated. Her glance now bespoke the truth of that.

Gerda von Rothe shivered and made an audible sound in her throat. She broke the spell. "Get dressed," she commanded harshly. "Hurry up. Then we must talk. I must be getting back to the castle."

She watched him dress. Then she tossed him the Webley, still loaded, and put the Luger away in a holster. She was supremely confident now.

"Come," she told him. "We will walk a little way. And talk. I think, Jamie, that I may be able to use you. It will be easy work" — the green eyes glinted at him — "and I will pay you well. You are badly in need of money, I think?"

"Yes, ma'am. I surely am."

She frowned. "Do not call me ma'am — call me Gerda for now. But that does not mean you are to be too familiar, you understand? I am hiring you, Jamie. You and your body. No matter what happens, you are a servant. Nothing more. Is that understood?"

"Yes, m... I mean, yes, Gerda. I understand that. It's okay by me. I ain't much, I guess. Just a gold tramp that's never had any luck."

She frowned at him. A breeze got into the silver mane and tousled it around her face. She was nearly as tall as he, Nick saw, and would weigh about 150–160. All firmly packed woman. Even in the jodhpurs and plain blouse there was a hint of the Rubensian about her figure.

She was still frowning. "Don't whine," she said. "It sickens me. People are what they make themselves, Jamie. You don't appear to have made much of yourself. I find that a little odd, a man with a body like yours. Why aren't you a fighter, or a wrestler, something like that. In the old days you could have been a gladiator!"

Nick did not answer. They reached the shallows and she stooped

to pick up a stone and toss it over the stream. By now the sun was low in the west.

Gerda von Rothe indicated a flat boulder. “We will sit here and talk, Jamie. Have you a cigarette?”

“Only Mex. They ain’t very good.”

“They’ll do. Give me one.” Imperious. Like a good slave, Nick gave her a cigarette and lit it for her. She blew smoke through the arrogant nose. “This is the place to talk. In the open where no one can get near you.”

Nick, who had a strong feeling that they were being watched at the moment, repressed his smile. If she only knew. He hoped the gunner wouldn’t decide to start sniping again, whether in fun or not. It would ruin everything.

Gerda stared at him through smoke. “You are not an educated man, are you?”

“No. Guess not. I only went to the fifth grade. Why? You need an educated man for the job you are talking about?”

Another frown. “I will ask all the questions, Jamie. You will *not* ask questions. You will obey orders. To the letter. And that is all you will do.”

“Sure. Of course. But the job — what you want me to do?”

She answered his question with another. “Have you ever killed a man, Jamie?”

Nick could answer that truthfully. “Yes. A couple of times. But always in fair fight.”

Gerda von Rothe nodded. She seemed satisfied. “I want a man killed, Jamie. Perhaps two men. Maybe even more. You will agree to do this? There will be some danger to yourself, I warn you.”

“I don’t mind the danger. I ain’t exactly a stranger to it. But the price will have to be right — I’m not taking a chance on a firing squad for peanuts.”

She leaned toward him, the green eyes as hard as glass on his, and for a moment Nick had the impression of a lioness. “Ten thousand dollars for the first man,” she said softly. “Ten thousand for each one after that. Is that not fair and generous?”

Nick pretended to consider for a moment, then said, “Yeah. That sounds all right. Who do I kill? How? And when?”

Gerda got up. She stretched her big lush body like a cat. She tapped the riding crop on her thigh. “I am not exactly sure yet. I must make a plan. And I will have to get you into the castle. The men I want you to kill are there. They are dangerous men, and very cautious. You will have one chance only. Nothing must go wrong.”

Nick looked down at his ragged clothes. “Your guards wouldn’t let me in the gate.”

"No need for that. You will not come in the front gate. And I have clothes at the castle, everything you will need. Once you are in I can introduce you as... as a transient friend. It will not surprise them. I have... entertained male friends before."

Nick thought: *I'll just bet you have, baby!*

Gerda von Rothe picked up Nick's wrist with a big, well-manicured hand. She wore no nail polish. She glanced at the handsome wrist watch — he had hoped she would not notice it — and said, "My God, is it that late? I must be getting back."

The touch of her dry, warm fingers sent an electric current tingling through Nick. He tried to withdraw his hand but she held it tightly. She was staring at the watch. Her eyes were a little narrowed when she looked at him again. "This is quite a watch for a bum."

It was indeed a very special watch. Nick prayed that the hour hand would not start flickering now. It was in fact a combination watch and DF — directional finder — and the hour hand would flick around instantly to point out the source of any radio transmission within twenty-five miles. The watch, and the beeper in the hilt of his knife, were all the "gadgets" he had been permitted on this mission.

He met her eyes squarely. "It's a beaut, huh? I stole it in Tampico about a year ago. I figured to hock it, but somehow I never did. Now I won't have to — after I do this job for you."

They walked back downstream. She appeared to have forgotten the watch. "You will come to the castle tonight," she told him. "Come about midnight and stay away from the main gate. There is a smaller gate, a postern, about half a mile north of the gate, that will be to the right, where the fence turns west to the sea. Come to that gate. I will be waiting for you. Be very quiet, very careful. The guards patrol around the inside of the fence every hour and they will have dogs with them. I can do nothing to disrupt the routine. It would make them suspicious. Do you think you can do this? And make no mistakes?"

Nick thought it time to show a little spirit. "I ain't exactly a moron," he growled. "Just because I ain't educated don't mean I'm a dummy. You just leave it to me."

Again the hard green stare. Then: "I think perhaps you will do, Jamie. So long as you obey orders and do not try to think for yourself, do not try to understand what is going on." She laughed shortly. "That would be a mistake, I assure you. It is much too complicated for a man like you. You are a magnificent brute, Jamie, and I expect you to do a brute's work. Nothing more."

She let her thigh brush his. She wet her lips with a scarlet tongue. "And I shall reward you as a brute, Jamie. Other than the money, I mean. I can promise that you will not be disappointed."

They reached the clearing and the pond. The palomino was grazing regally alone, ignoring Jamie as one of the lower classes. The two Dobermans lay panting exactly where they had been left. Well-trained brutes, Nick thought. They showed their fangs at him and snarled as he approached, but did not move.

Gerda von Rothe swung into the saddle, tall and imperious as some female Caesar. Nick, on sudden impulse, put one hand on her thigh, on the inside, between the knee and crotch. He squeezed gently and grinned up at her. “I’ll see you at midnight then, Gerda.”

For a second or two she suffered his touch. Her smile was hard, cold, cruel. Then she slashed him across the face with the riding crop, a hard and stinging blow.

“Never touch me again,” she said. “Until I tell you I want to be touched. Goodbye, Jamie. Midnight at the postern.”

Nick, his fingers tenderly exploring the weal on his face, watched her skirt the pond and head for the mesa. She put the palomino into a canter. Damon and Pythias loped along behind.

He stared after her until she was out of sight. When at last he turned toward the hut his face wore an expression of puzzlement, of near disbelief, that was most unusual for the AXE agent. In his line of work he had been in some weird situations, but this beat them all. He felt as though he were walk-in some dark dream.

Bitch she might be. Legend she certainly was. If the stories, the rumors, the wide-spread publicity by mouth and print, if all these were to be believed — Gerda von Rothe was seventy years old!

Chapter 6
El Tigre

They came upon him while he was using the latrine. A sly move on their part. A man with his trousers down is at a great disadvantage. Nick had put the Webley beside him on the ground. As the four bandits stepped out of the shelter of the little clump of *yucca* trees he reached for it, but halted the motion in time. Four carbines covered him.

The youngest of the bandits — he was little more than a boy, with a flashing white smile — said, *"Buenos dias, Señor.* Or should I say good evening? Anyway, Señor, please to put up the hands. Do not fear. We do not intend you harm."

Nick Carter scowled at them. "Is it all right if I fasten my belt first?"

The youth nodded. He was evidently the leader, despite his tender years. "Please do, Señor. But please to try no monkey tricks — I would not like to shoot you. Jose! Get the revolver."

Nick, on the opposite side of the latrine, watched in disgust as one of the bandits picked up the Webley and handed it to the boy. To be taken so easily was humiliating. He had been deep in thought, pondering about Gerda von Rothe, the castle, and the strange turn that events were taking. He had *not* been alert. Sometimes it was an error to think.

He said: "You're making a mistake, you know. I haven't got anything worth stealing, unless you consider a few cans of food and a mangy burro worthwhile."

The young man laughed, his teeth flashing in the thickening dusk. "We know that, Señor. We do not come to rob you. But no more talk — my brother, *El Tigre*, awaits you impatiently. You were a long time coming, Señor, I think. You *gringos* do not keep your promises well."

Nick was prodded back into the Joshua trees where a single mule was waiting. The bandits were walking, it seemed, and the mule was for him. He soon found out why. He was blindfolded and made to mount the mule. The beast had a bony spine that dug into Nick like — a saw. His feet were bound beneath the mule's belly, but his hands were left free.

Before the blindfold was secured he had a good look at them. The three older men had flat, impassive Indian faces the color of old pennies. They were all dressed alike in the classical uniform of Mexican *bandidos* — loose pajama-like suits that had once been white but were filthy now, and tall wide-brimmed sombreros. All wore

thonged sandals. Each carried two leather bandoleers criss-crossed over the chest. All had pistols and knives in addition to the carbines. And, Nick thought, as cutthroat a crew as you were likely to find anywhere in the world. You had to be tough to survive long as a bandit in Mexico. It was usually a short life, if not a merry one, and when they were caught the authorities did not bother to give them a trial. The bandits were made to dig their own graves, granted a last cigarette, then the firing squad did its work. He could not help wondering how, in this year of 1966, *El Tigre* had managed to survive. The Mexican government was loud in its claims that banditry had been wiped out.

Was there, perhaps, some kind of a deal? Again Nick had the feeling that he was stumbling around in a dream, groping in a labyrinth. New corridors kept appearing. What had Hawk called the mission? *A many-faceted sonofabitch!* Nick was beginning to agree with his boss.

He tried to memorize the path they took. He knew when they reached the dead end of the *barranca* and the mule lurched up the narrow steep winze. If they kept straight on now they would be on the mesa. But the mule was pulled to the right, toward the mountain from which he had spied, had been shot at, the night before. Nick waited for the climb to begin, but instead he went down a steep grade, the mule slipping and sliding on its rump in shale, and he could tell by the sudden change in acoustics — the bandits bantered among themselves constantly — that they were in another canyon. They kept going down, always down. Nick gave it up. He was hopelessly lost.

During the hour-long trek he had plenty of time to think. Slipping and sliding around on the mule, tormented by the bony spine of the creature, still he managed to concentrate. Perhaps the blindfold helped him. He struggled fiercely to keep his thoughts in orderly flow, in logical sequence, trying to make some sort of sense out of a decidedly weird concatenation of events.

Gerda von Rothe had been expecting the ex-Nazi, the SS man, whose body Nick had found and buried. The man probably had come from Brazil. Obviously he had been a killer sent to do a job for Gerda. A job that Nick was now taking over. Or so Gerda thought. He made a shrewd guess that one of the men she wanted killed was Maxwell Harper, the public relations man. Why? Nick gave that up for the moment. He hadn't the faintest idea, except that Gerda had given the impression of a woman who was a prisoner in her own castle. Possible...

Who was the other man? — Or men? — whom she wanted killed? The *mestizo,* or Chinese, he had seen in the village? Again possible. The *mestizo* and Harper appeared to be working closely together. But

again — why murder? And how did the Chinese Reds and Nazis spin in the same plot, if they did? Nick Carter shook his head and nearly groaned aloud. Wheels within wheels!

Now on to the next baffling factor in this crazy skein. *El Tigre* was *expecting* him! Had been for some time, according to the young leader of the bandits. The muscles knotted in Nick's lean jaw. Hell's fire! The CIA man had skimmed lightly over the bandit situation. Too goddamned lightly. The bandits were not likely to bother him. So he had been assured. Yet here he was bouncing around on this razor-backed obscenity of a mule, a captive of bandits.

His thoughts flashed back to Gerda von Rothe and the first words she had spoken to him.

"Der Tag kommt."

The day is coming! What day? When? Why? How? Who? And where did the Chinese, the counterfeit money fit in? This time Nick did groan aloud.

The bandit leader, who must have been riding close behind him, was immediately solicitous. "You are in pain, Señor?"

"This screwing mule is killing me," Nick said harshly. His temper was fraying badly and he told himself to watch it. This was a time for the icy imperturbability he was capable of at his best. He was not at his best just now. He had to admit that. And not only because of his poor posture at the moment. He had the sickening feeling of a blind man groping in a tar pit. There were things, events, trains of motion, of which he had no inkling. He was convinced now that information, *important information,* had been deliberately withheld from him by the CIA. Even if their lapse was not deliberate, if it had been a mistake, an oversight, it was still just as bad.

His silent curses were searing, vitriolic, and had he been confronted with the CIA Director at that moment his language would have earned him a court-martial at the very least. CIA was just too blankety-blank big, with too many irons in the fire, to function efficiently. Thank God for AXE. Then Nick included Hawk in his maledictions for ever getting him into this.

"I am sorry we have no saddle, Señor," said the young bandit. "But be of hope — it is not far now."

To clear his mind, and take his thoughts off his woes, Nick asked, "Which one of you bastards shot at me last night?"

The bandit laughed. "I am sorry about that, Señor. My brother was *muy colérico* about it. Very angry. It was one called Gonzalez who is not all there in the head, perhaps. He was making the joke, the prank, you understand. He wished to give you the fright."

"He succeeded," said Nick sourly.

Ten minutes later he was helped off the mule. The blindfold

stayed on. He was led carefully down what he knew must be a mine shaft. That figured. There probably were scores of derelict mines in the area, perfect nests for bandits. The thought returned — why hadn't the Federal police smoked them out and killed them?

The blindfold was taken off. Nick blinked in the yellow light of oil lanterns hanging from the low ceiling. It was a mine shaft, all right. Moisture dribbled from the ceiling, which was supported by huge timbers, and ran down the sides of the shaft. Rust-eaten rails were embedded in the floor of the shaft.

The young bandit smiled at him. "Come. I will take you to my brother." He strode off down the shaft. Nick shot a glance behind him. He saw perhaps a dozen men lounging about the shaft. There were blanket rolls and sleeping bags — the latter no doubt stolen and the owners buried or left for the vultures — and some of the men were cooking over small fires. There was a draft through the shaft that kept it free of smoke.

The young bandit stopped before a large ragged tarpaulin that screened a gallery off the shaft. "*Hermano* — here is the *gringo.* He is angry and he has the sore ass, but he is safe. You wish to see him now, *sí?*"

"Let him enter, Pancho. He alone." The English was good and almost without accent. It was the voice and tone of a man of some culture. Probably turn out to be a Ph.D., Nick thought. Nothing about this crazy mission could surprise him now.

The young bandit put a hand on Nick's shoulder and bent close to whisper. "My brother is a great man, Señor — but he is also *un gran borrachón.* My advice is to drink with him if you have the head for it. He does not like or trust men who do not drink."

Nick nodded his thanks, Pancho pressed his shoulder again and pulled the tarp aside and Nick entered the gallery. It had been blocked off and fitted out as crude living and sleeping quarters. A lamp dangled from the ceiling. Another lantern stood on a desk which had been made out of old crates. Behind the desk, staring at him now, was the man they called *El Tigre.*

The man stood up. With a courtly gesture he indicated a box near the desk. "Please sit down, sir. You will have a drink, of course? You must be in need of one after that trip by mule, yes? I have made it myself, and it is not comfortable."

"That," said Nick Carter, "is the understatement of the year." His eyes were busy, flicking around the little room, taking in everything. There were books everywhere. Shelves of them. Piles of them on the floor. Hard-cover and paperbacks.

El Tigre came around the desk and handed Nick a tin cup. "You will not mind," he said, "if we do not shake hands just yet? I am not

sure that we are going to be friends, you see. If I have to kill you later, which I should regret enormously, it will be a little easier if I have not shaken your hand. Do you understand?"

"I think I do," said Nick. "Though I cannot think of any reason why you should want to kill me."

"That could be," said *El Tigre*. "That could well be, but we will talk of that later." He lifted his own cup. *"Salud y pesetas, Señor."*

Nick drank. His throat contracted and his stomach churned. *Mescal! Pulque! Call it murder and be done with it.* He was aware of the man's eyes on him as he drank. He kept his face impassive and handed back the cup. "A little more, if you please."

El Tigre picked up a bottle and poured. Nick thought he detected a hint of approval in the dark eyes. *El Tigre* was a tall man, sturdily built, with a thick black bush of beard that gave him a Castroesque appearance. The beard was neatly trimmed and, as Nick took the cup again, he noted that the man's hands were clean and well-kept. *El Tigre* was not wearing the usual bandit uniform; he wore green fatigues, U.S. Army issue, and a flat, kepi-like cap. Something glinted on the cap. Nick looked closer and saw that it was a metal pin in the form of a mountain lion, or cougar, the "tiger" of Mexico.

They drank again, this time in silence. The mescal was already kindling a blaze in the AXEman's belly. All I need now, he told himself, is to get really blasted. Roaring drunk. That would just about cap things. He wouldn't, of course. He must stay sober and get on with the job. He had a premonition that it wasn't going to be easy. And he had not a single illusion — *El Tigre* would use the heavy pistol at his belt if the mood struck him. Nick was walking a very thin line betwixt life and death.

El Tigre went back to his desk. He clasped his hands and looked at Nick, who was wondering just how drunk the bandit chief was. More than a little, he guessed, though he carried it well.

"Now," said *El Tigre,* "we can get down to business. And let us begin with the thought that I am most angry with you people! You have not kept your word. You promised much and have delivered nothing. I spit in the milk of the CIA!" And he spat on the floor.

Nick Carter closed his eyes for a moment in silent supplication. Here it was. Goddamn those fumble-fingered bastards to hell! What have they gotten me into this time? His mind raced furiously. He had to make a decision as to how to play this thing, and he had to be right the first time. He decided.

"There has been some mistake," he said. "I am *not* of the CIA, though at the moment I am working for them." There went his cover. He could see no help for it.

El Tigre stared at Nick for a long time. Then, "Let me understand

you clearly, Señor. You are not of the CIA, yet you work for them. *Bueno*. It is the same thing, yes? You have brought me instructions and money, no? And no doubt the supplies promised me will soon be along?"

He was walking on eggs now. "I have brought none of those things," Nick said. "I know nothing of any of this. I swear it, *amigo.*" He made a further decision and added, "Can I stand up and show you something without being shot?"

El Tigre took a drink from the bottle of mescal. He loosened the flap of his holster and took out his pistol and laid it on the desk. "It is permitted, Señor. Be very careful. I am beginning to dislike you very much."

Nick rolled up his left sleeve and thrust his arm into the ring of light from the lantern. The little blue hatchet tattoo glinted in the soft radiance. For the moment Nick took back his recent evil thoughts about the symbol.

"I belong to an organization called AXE," he told *El Tigre.* "Ever hear of us?"

El Tigre stroked his beard. He nodded. "I have heard of you. You are a murder organization, yes? Executioners."

No use denying it. Nick had decided to play it absolutely straight. Lies would only get him killed.

"Among other things," he admitted. "This may or may not be a kill mission. I do not know yet. There are too many damned things I don't know. Among them is the tieup between you and the CIA. I know absolutely nothing of this, *El Tigre.* If you will tell me, and if you will trust me, perhaps we can be of some use to each other. Just whom were you expecting?"

El Tigre picked up the mescal bottle and found it empty. He took another from a case near his feet and filled their cups again. Nick sipped at his, put it down, and waited. The other man drank off the mescal in a single gulp. He refilled his cup. He suppressed a hiccup with his fingers and stared at Nick. Slowly he moved the finger around the little gallery, from wall to wall.

"You see how I must live, Señor? Hiding in a mine like a rat. It is not good, it is not fitting, that *El Tigre* should live so. I am a college graduate, Señor, of the famous University of Mexico. Where, I admit, I majored in banditry." White teeth glinted through the beard in a smile. "That is a joke, of course. I was a philosophy major."

Nick could not resist the question, though he knew it was taking them away from the tack he wished to pursue. "Why, then, did you become a bandit?"

"Why indeed?" *El Tigre* filled Nick's cup and pushed it toward him. "Drink!" It was a command. Nick drank. He was, without doubt,

starting to get a buzz on. *Have to watch it,* he told himself. *Just have to watch it, boy.*

El Tigre hunched his big shoulders. “I do not know why I became a bandit. My mother loved me and I had no suppressed desire to go to bed with her. Not a trace of an Oedipus Complex did I have, Señor — by the way, what is your name?”

Nick told him his real name and added, “My cover name is Jamie McPherson. I’m supposed to be a gold bum, panning for a stake. Your brother will vouch for that, I think.”

“Nick Carter! I have heard of you, sir, in an underground sort of way. You are quite famous, I believe.” Nick could detect a glint of respect in the dark eyes. Respect and something else? Calculation? Was this character really as drunk as he seemed?

El Tigre picked up the pistol from his desk and pointed it at Nick in a loose, floppy sort of way. “But let us get back,” he said, “to why I became a bandit. A most interesting question and, as I said, I cannot really answer. I suppose a psychoanalyst (I spit in the milk of all psychoanalysts) would say that it is because someone stole my little red wagon when I was a child. Some such nonsense. But I never had a red wagon and if I had one and someone stole it, I would have killed him. No, Señor Carter, I had a most happy childhood. My people were well off and my mother, God rest her, was a saint. My father was not exactly a saint, but a good man nonetheless and I—”

El Tigre leveled the pistol at Nick’s feet and pulled the trigger. It was a .45 automatic and the roar filled the tiny gallery. Nick half started from the chair, sweat pouring from him, panic grabbing at him. He could not understand why he felt nothing. No shock, no pain, nothing.

Then he saw the huge rat. It was kicking in its death throes about three feet from the chair. The heavy slug had torn out its guts. Blood smeared the earth.

El Tigre was blowing smoke from the muzzle of the pistol. He grinned at Nick. “I hope I didn’t startle you, Señor? I hate rats. I shoot them all the time down here. There must be millions of them.”

The AXEman dug out his cruddy handkerchief and wiped sweat out of his eyes. His nerves were thrumming. He began to wonder if *El Tigre* was crazy as well as drunk. He picked up his cup and drained the rest of the mescal.

“You did startle me a bit,” he said. “But let’s get on with it, shall we? About the CIA.” He glanced at his watch. The hour hand was doing its regular job, on the regular course. It was five after nine. The Bitch would be waiting for him at the postern gate at midnight. Hah! There was about one chance in a thousand that he could keep *that* date.

But *El Tigre,* as he stood up now, did not sway or stagger. He seemed to shake off the effects of the deadly mescal with ease. “You will excuse me for a few moments, Señor. I must speak with my brother.” He thrust the pistol into its holster and left the room.

While he was gone Nick examined the books. History, philosophy, political science, biography — *El Tigre* was a great reader, an educated man. Therein, the AXEman thought, lay his best hope. He was not dealing with a mindless peasant consumed with greed and blood lust. Nick Carter’s sharp mind began to formulate a plan. A devious plan, one which entailed going against orders, but Hawk would understand. The situation had changed since his briefing in San Diego — how it had changed!

El Tigre came back. He seated himself at the desk again and poured mescal for both of them. Nick was aware of a pleasant euphoria now — watch that! — and the little gallery tilted every now and then. He was not yet drunk — but verging on it.

El Tigre selected a long maduro cigar from a box and handed the box to Nick. The AXEman lit up, then coughed. The stogie was strong enough to stand by itself.

“Pancho tells me you have been talking to *La Perra,* The Bitch from the castle, Señor?” *El Tigre* let blue smoke leak from his nostrils as he stared at Nick.

Nick nodded. They had been watching, of course. “Yes. We had a most interesting conversation. I am to be a guest at the castle — in fact I am to go there tonight at midnight.” He glanced at his watch. It was now nine-thirty. “With your permission, naturally. And I will need a guide. I do not know where I am.”

To his surprise *El Tigre* inclined his head a bit. “It is possible that you may keep that appointment. We shall see. I have much interest in The Bitch. You might say it amounts to an obsession. I wish to rape her. Rape her and loot her castle. I would have done it before this, but I have been behaving like a good boy because of the CIA promises. But now my patience is at an end — but let us take it in the proper order, Señor. Then, as you say, we may be able to help each other. Here, drink!”

Nick drank. The dead rat seemed to move, and a red and blue cloud was hovering in the squalid little room. Grimly he hung on to an inner sense of sobriety.

He leaned toward *El Tigre,* grinning. He felt wonderful.

“Tell me,” Nick said. “Tell me all about your deal with the CIA.”

El Tigre stared at the ceiling. His red lips pursed beneath the fringe of black beard and he blew a perfect smoke ring. “A pleasure, Señor. But first I repeat — I think they have this time fumbled the ball!”

“You’re telling me!”
Nick said it bitterly, and with feeling.

Chapter 7
A Die Is Cast

"Six months ago," *El Tigre* said, "my fortunes were very low, Señor Carter. I had lost many men, the pickings were poor, and the Federal police — may I live to spit in their milk — were closing in on me. Since I am not a man to surrender, I was prepared to die. Then, suddenly, a miracle — the police ceased to pursue me. They sent a message to me — that if I remained in this area, and did not operate, I would not be bothered. I could not understand it." He drank from the bottle and tossed it to Nick. Nick drank, wondering if yoga would do him any good in this, situation. If he went into a trance would it shake off the lethal effect of the mescal? He decided not.

"A short time later," went on the bandit chief, "a CIA man got in touch with me. He posed as a tourist who had gotten lost. He had credentials which seemed genuine. I accepted him as such. We had much talk together."

Nick Carter nodded in understanding. The picture was clearing just a bit. The CIA had found a use for *El Tigre*, so they had used political weight and influence to call off the police. But why?

"There was talk of a Serpent Party," said *El Tigre.* "Of which I knew little. It had just started. But the CIA man was very concerned — he said that the Serpent Party was backed by the Red Chinese and that in time they would try to take over power in Mexico. I am afraid I laughed at him, Señor Carter, but he was very serious. He wished to use me, and my men, as a nucleus, a cadre, to fight any revolution which the Serpent Party might start. I was to recruit as many men as possible for that purpose. In the meantime I was not to operate as a *bandido,* but remain quietly in hiding. Does any of this make sense to you, *amigo?*"

Nick admitted that it did. He took back some, if not all, of the nasty things he had been thinking about the CIA. Give them credit — they planned a long time ahead. If they thought there was danger of a Chinese-inspired revolution in Mexico — a danger always present in that politically volatile country (look at the record) — then they would at least have a force ready to fight back, a banner to which the counter-revolutionary forces could rally. *El Tigre* would not be the first bandit to fight for Mexico's freedom.

"I was promised many supplies and much money," said *El Tigre.* "Meantime I was to sit tight, refrain from robbing the rich and giving to the poor, and recruit men. All of which I did, Señor. But nothing came of it. I have heard nothing from the CIA since. Another agent

was to come, to live with me and my men, but he never came. The supplies and the money never came. So you will understand, perhaps, why I am disappointed that you are not of the CIA?" He took a huge drink from the bottle of mescal.

Nick puffed on the maduro cigar. What a mess! Still he must find a way through this murky labyrinth to accomplish his own mission.

"There has been a large snafu somewhere," Nick said. "Perhaps the CIA is not really to blame. Their agent may have been killed before he could contact you, and you—"

"There *was* a man killed," said *El Tigre*. "Near the very place where my men found you. His clothes were burned and his body sunk in the pond."

Nick stared at the man. "You *saw* that?"

El Tigre shrugged. "Not I. One of my men. We keep a sharp lookout and do not miss much. The man was killed by an American, one who goes by the name of Maxwell Harper. Sometimes he stays at the castle with *La Perra*. But I do not think he is sleeping with her. I have it that they are not *simpatico*. If they were lovers I do not think The Bitch would pick up bums and tramps, at times hitchhikers, and take them home with her. We have watched her do so."

Nick ignored this further insight into Gerda von Rothe's character. Her rather strange sexual mores could wait.

"Was the American, this Harper, was he alone when he killed the man?"

"No. There was another, one who passes as a *mestizo*, with him. He is really a Chinese. But he did not kill the man. The *gringo* did that with a Tommy gun. Then, as I say, they put him in the pond and burned his clothes. When they had gone my men fished the body out of the water and examined it. They brought me the news and I also examined the body. Then we put it back in the pond. It did not seem to be of our business." *El Tigre* took another long black stogie from the box and lit it.

So much for Siegfried, or whatever his real name had been, whom The Bitch had been expecting. Harper and the Chinese had intercepted and dealt with him in a final sort of way. And Gerda von Rothe, desperate for help, had offered Jamie McPherson the job that the ex-Nazi could not do because he had been suddenly taken dead.

El Tigre took a drink and gave the bottle to Nick. "Drink!" He added, "I found the SS tattoo on the dead man very interesting. There are a great many Nazis hiding in South America, I hear. But the CIA man was only interested in the Red Chinese. He said nothing of Germans."

"I don't think he could have known anything about the Nazis," Nick said. He was trying to keep the last drink of mescal down. His

stomach was aflame. After fighting down nausea, he asked, “Did the CIA man say anything about the castle, about *El Mirador?* Were you asked to keep an eye on the woman?”

El Tigre shook his mane of black hair. “Nothing. Except that we were to keep away from it. He did not appear concerned with *El Mirador*. I thought it was because The Bitch is so rich, and so important in the States. Do you really think she is seventy years old, Señor Carter? You have seen her closer than I have, you have spoken with her. What do you think?”

The non sequitur interrupted Nick’s train of thought. He stared through the hanging cigar smoke at the bandit. Then, “I cannot really say. Certainly she does not look it, or act it. She looks no more than thirty-five, forty at the most. She is very beautiful in a cold, rather cruel sort of way. Yet all the stories about her, the publicity over the years, they all claim that she is really seventy and has been kept young by her creams and lotions — and her way of life. I am a skeptic and I find it hard to believe. Yet there she is. But I do not see what it has to do with the matter at hand.”

His resolve had firmed in the last few minutes. The CIA was wrong about *El Mirador* and The Bitch. They had to be! And he was going to prove it. He was going for broke. If *he* was wrong he would only be hanged, drawn and quartered.

“It has very much to do with the matter at hand,” said *El Tigre*. He spat on the floor and grinned at Nick. “Provided, of course, that we *agree* on the matter at hand.”

Nick glanced at his watch again. It was ten. “I want to get into that castle,” he said. “And take it apart.”

El Tigre nodded. “So do I. I will be even more specific — I wish to steal everything in the castle that is worth stealing.

I will no longer honor my word to the CIA. My patience is at an end. After the raid I will break up my band and we will scatter. I shall perhaps go to South America — there is not really much future in the bandit business anyway. But first — ah, first — I must rape The Bitch. I have promised myself that.”

Nick was aware of the mescal working in him. The room was moving slowly around him and he could hear the faint music of a carousel in the distance. With a great effort he kept his words from slurring.

“I must confess,” he said carefully, “that I find that a strange ambition. Why rape? If what you say is true, about the way she picks up men, raping The Bitch should not be necessary.”

“Ah,” cried *El Tigre*. “Ah, but it would not be the same! There would not be the same fierce pleasure. I am a violent man, Señor Carter. I admit it. All of us have our little perversions, and one of mine

is that I cannot enjoy a woman who gives herself freely."

It was the mescal that laughed. Nick said, "Then perhaps you will be disappointed, *amigo*. She will probably welcome you."

"Then I should be most desolate." *El Tigre* pulled at his beard. "I have been counting on this rape for a long time. The Bitch is so — well, truly that. A bitch! Proud. Arrogant. She has used her riding crop on the peasants and Indians around here as if she owned them. I am going to humble that pride. I will make her scream and cry for mercy."

Nick Carter shrugged. Why not? Gerda von Rothe was nothing to him, except as a lead to accomplishing his mission. And he was sure now that his real work, the source of all the mystery — of the counterfeit notes and the Golden Serpent Party — lay in or near the castle of *El Mirador*. So he would use *El Tigre* for his own ends. Just as *El Tigre* was using him.

The bandit chief was staring dreamily off into space, a cigar drooping from his mouth, the mescal bottle in his hand. He picked up something from the floor beside him and flung it at Nick. "I look at that picture every night before I go to sleep, Señor Carter. And promise myself I will one day have her. Now is the time."

It was one of the slick American fashion magazines, tattered and ripped, the cover missing. The date was five years previous. There was a full-page layout showing Gerda von Rothe lounging by a swimming pool in a bikini. She looked like a Venus done by Botticelli, the lush and fleshy curves starkly revealed by the tiny suit. The caption read: "The Miracle of Sixty-five!"

Nick scanned the text with bleary eyes, the type writhing and undulating like a live thing. There was something about *Black Oxen,* and another fictional allusion, H. Rider Haggard's *She,* and a lot more about the creams and strict health routine used by the fabulous von Rothe to hang on to her youth.

Killmaster — was he really Killmaster? — shoved the magazine back at *El Tigre*. The room was floating now. He was himself suspended a foot off the ground.

"Maybe," he managed to say. "Maybe it's true, but I still think it's some trick." He had to laugh.

"I hope not," said *El Tigre*. "That would be most cruel of Fate. I have looked forward so much to the raping of this seventy-year-old woman. It will be the greatest of thrills — and I am a man who has had many thrills in my time. What are you doing, Señor Carter?"

"I," said Señor Carter, "am going to throw up, *amigo*. Toss my cookies. I hope you will overlook my bad manners, but I am drunk. And that will not do. There is work to be done."

"It is true," agreed *El Tigre,* "that you are *completamente borracho*.

I am sorry. It is, perhaps, that you do not have the head for drinking. But be my guest, Señor. As indeed you already are. Feel free to vomit to your heart's content."

As he spewed in a corner Nick found himself thinking that it was most unjust of *El Tigre* to denigrate his drinking ability. Nick Carter could drink with any man. Well, nearly any man. Then the hot gush filled his throat again and he thought of nothing. When at last he turned back to the desk, pale and shaking, he saw that *El Tigre* was on his feet. The bandit leader was canted to one side, like a bearded Tower of Pisa, but he was smiling.

"Come," he told Nick. "Now we ride. I myself will take you to the castle. We will make our plans on the way. We will work together and each shall have what he wants. As you *gringos* say — you scrub my back and I will scrub yours, *sí?*"

"Sí." He was feeling a little better. Whether he could stay on a horse remained to be seen.

El Tigre thrust out a big hand. "Now we will shake, my good friend. I like you. I trust you. You of AXE are of the salt of the earth. I spit in the milk of the CIA."

They shook hands. *El Tigre* lurched out into the mine shaft and began bawling orders that sent the bandits scrambling about like wild men. Nick was given back the Webley.

It was Pancho, the younger brother, who insisted on the blindfold again. *El Tigre* could not have cared less. But Pancho, as he tied the bandana over Nick's eyes, was as friendly as ever. "It is for your own protection, *hombre.* When the great one is *borracho* he forgets. But I do not. But if you do not know this place you cannot betray us and we will not have to kill you. Is it not so?"

Nick agreed that it was so.

"Let's go!" yelled *El Tigre.* "We do not have all night. My *amigo* must not be late for his appointment with *La Perra.*"

It was a ride Killmaster was never to forget. This time he had a horse and a saddle with a pommel to hang on to, and it was just as well. *El Tigre,* with a long lead on Nick's mount, took them at a furious pace. Sliding, slipping, climbing. Up hills and through ravines and over mesas. Finally the bandit reined in. "You can take off the blindfold now, *amigo*. We are nearly there."

They were on a low butte overlooking the highway. A gibbous moon shed some faint light. In the distance Nick could see lights in *El Mirador.* The gate and guardhouse were in darkness. Probably intentional. He remembered the guard he had seen cleaning the Tommy gun.

He glanced at his watch, finally made it out to be eleven-thirty. Half an hour until he was to meet Gerda von Rothe at the postern

gate.

"Now," said *El Tigre,* "we will make our plans, *amigo.* They are very simple. Listen."

They talked for fifteen minutes and reached complete agreement. Killmaster knew he had cast the die now, crossed the Rubicon, and there could be no turning back. He needed *El Tigre* and the bandit needed him. Each for their separate purposes. What Nick was going to do was illegal in the extreme — he was going to break a hell of a lot of laws. No help for it. In any case he and Hawk had agreed that he was to handle matters his own way. If he was wrong — well, that just didn't bear thinking about.

El Tigre patted him on the knee. "It is time you go, *amigo.* I will see you at the appointed time. *Buena suerte*."

Nick slid out of the saddle. He must go the rest of the way on foot, and very quietly. He shook hands with El Tigre. *"Adiós."*

El Tigre leaned down toward the AXEman. "Be very careful, *amigo*. Most cautious. There is one thing I forgot to mention — we have seen The Bitch take many men into the castle. We have never seen any of the men come out."

Thanks a lot, said Nick. Under his breath. He watched as *El Tigre* led the other horse away down the gentle back slope of the butte. Well — here it was. This was it.

He knew that he was still a little drunk. His head ached. But all in all he was in fair shape, considering the mescal he had put away. What a character, that *El Tigre.*

Killmaster took another look at his watch. Only ten of twelve now. Then he stiffened, his eyes on the hour hand of the watch. It was trembling, moving, in frenetic little jerks. The DF was working. Someone was using a powerful transmitter in the vicinity. The hour hand stopped at last, pointing directly at the castle.

Nick felt a sense of relief. His hunch was beginning to pay off.

Chapter 8
Sex in the Morning

Killmaster came awake as he always did, abruptly and in full possession of his faculties. He did not move and he did not open his eyes, but he knew where he was, how he had gotten there and why he was there. His head ached a trifle and his stomach was queasy — after-effects of the deadly mescal — but he did not really have a hangover.

He could hear Gerda von Rothe breathing softly beside him and her leg, plump and pneumatic, lay warm against his own. Nick moved away just enough to break the contact. The woman stirred and muttered something in her sleep. He could not make out the words, but she spoke in German.

He became aware of soft music seeping into the room. It was muted, very low, and had been there all along. He lay unmoving, eyes closed, trying to induce a semi-trance and sort things out in his mind. But the music kept intruding and he knew it would continue to do so until he had identified it. It was a Freudian thing he had about any environment in which he found himself — he must know it in depth. Scan every factor which might contribute to his life, on death! Dot every "i" and cross every "t." He was really a practical ecologist, as Hawk had once put it, studying cause and effect with the object of staying alive.

At last he identified the music — *The Bartered Bride* by Smetana. He felt faint surprise. After last night, and into the early hours of this morning, spent coping with the silver-haired Amazon beside him, he would have expected Wagner at least. Perhaps the *Ride of The Valkyries.* Nick sighed in not unpleasant remembrance. Gerda had certainly given him a ride! The woman was insatiable. If she was in truth seventy years old — he was glad he had not met her when she was thirty. He would be dead this morning.

With a finger he removed the night matter from his eyes and opened them. He stared at the ceiling. It was a good sixty feet above him, arched and groined. If he had needed a reminder that he was in a medieval fortress, a fairy castle stolen from the Rhine, the ceiling would have done it. Banners and pennons hung limply from the arches, each bearing the white lily of cosmetic fame. It was a jarring note.

Nick let his slightly bloodshot eyes roam around the bedroom. If you could call an acre of tesselated floor a bedroom. There were several tall windows, with mullions, covered now with messaline

drapes, not more than fifty feet from him. He wondered what the windows overlooked. A possible escape route?

The bed in which he was lying was enormous. It was a boat bed, fashioned in the form of a huge golden swan. Baronial living, this. Nick thought briefly of the other men who had been brought here by The Bitch. They must have serviced her in this very bed, just as he had last night. What had become of them? He thought he knew — dead men could not tattle of strange amours!

He became aware of a strange whirring and clicking overhead. A moment later a picture flashed on the creamy blank wall farthest from him. There was a projector up there in the arches, as well as the speaker for music. Both worked automatically. He remembered last night, after The Bitch had brought him to this amazing room by way of a secret passage — and made him take a cold shower — how he and the woman had lain in bed and watched the pictures flash on and off the wall. Erotic pictures, if you cared for euphemism. Pornographic, if you stuck to truth. They *had* been exciting, Nick recalled, and of good quality. But trust the von Rothe to have nothing but the best, even in pornography.

The thing must have an automatic timer, Nick conjectured, since now it was showing quite innocuous landscapes. There was the Matterhorn, a shot of the Arctic, with polar bears, and then the Tower of London. A flash of a baseball game. Mickey Mantle was just stroking a homer. Nick lay and watched with some interest. Quite a fascinating gadget. The Bitch had murmured, last night, that she preferred it to the stasis of paintings.

The projector made a mistake. It flashed a decidedly lewd picture on the wall. A man and three women indulging in sexual acrobatics. Nick grinned and repressed a chuckle. The machine was mixed up — there were obviously night pictures and day pictures, bed and non-bed pictures.

"The damned thing needs repairing," said a sleepy voice beside him. "It's always getting mixed up. I'll switch it off."

Killmaster was tempted to say, *"Gutem Morgen, schön Fräulein."* But he remembered in time that he was Jamie McPherson, poor ignorant Jamie with no education. Here to do a job for the *Fräulein* von Rothe. A slight job of murder.

So he said: "Good morning, Gerda. You're right — that machine is mixed, up. It shouldn't show pictures like that so early in the morning. Might give a fellow ideas." He summoned the best leer of which he was capable at that hour.

The woman ignored him. She leaned to fumble beneath her side of the bed. The picture faded from the. wall and the music stopped. Nick made a note of that. Control buttons beneath the bed. For the

music and projector — and what else? Call it intuition, or the seventh sense he had developed over the years, but he was thinking that she must have some sort of alarm system.

Gerda von Rothe sat up in bed and faced him. The royal purple sheet of finest silk, no ersatz for this lady, covered her only to the waist. Her big torso was tawny, tinted with the same golden sheen as her face, and there was not an ounce of flab on her. Her face, even with the lines of sleep still on it, was a scimitar of arrogant beauty, the mouth wide and the eyes like emeralds. Her breasts were large and heavy and very firm, with long red nipples and brownish halos. They pointed directly at Nick now, like twin cannons. She made no attempt to cover herself.

"You were drunk last night," she accused. Her green stare was hard. She ran a big hand through tousled silver hair. "It will not happen again, do you understand!" It was not a question.

He nodded. "I understand. I'm sorry about it. I had a bottle of tequila in my pack and well, I just had too much I reckon. But it turned out all right. I got here, didn't I?"

The scarlet mouth curled. "That is not the point, fool. I am paying you to do a job for me. You must not botch it." She bit hard into her lower lip and stared at him for a long moment. "It will go hard with you, Jamie, if you bungle it. If they don't kill you first, I will. You must be sure to understand that. For one thing, if you *do* drink and botch it, *they* will kill you without doubt. Both Harper and Hurtada are very tough and they know how to handle guns. It is not going to be easy to kill them."

So at last his victims had names! Nick had no intention of killing them or anyone, unless it lay in the line of duty, but it was good to know whom he was supposed to kill. Harper he knew about, of course, and he could guess that Hurtada was the *mestizo* — the Chinese, rather, who was passing as a *mestizo*. He wondered just how much of the truth The Bitch intended telling him?

Nick repeated the names. "Hurtada and Harper? Them's the guys I knock off, huh? You said you would make a plan, Gerda. Maybe you better tell me now. I need to know a lot, everything there is to know, if I ain't going to botch it like you say. How soon you want these characters killed? When? Where? How? You see what I mean?"

Her smile was faint. "You are learning, Jamie. At least you did not ask *why* I want them killed. Nor would I tell you. Call it a... a sort of a palace revolution. Do you know what that means?"

"No, I don't guess I do. But you got the palace for it, all right."

"So I have, Jamie. And that is just the point — the old fool who built this castle was a romantic, a man born out of his time. He must have been raised on Scott and Ouida — but of course that means

nothing to you."

"No. It don't."

"Of course not. But the point is that this castle is huge. There are places where even I have not been — and there are dungeons and secret passages and a great many hidden, out of the way nooks. Places where a body would never be found. You will explore the castle today, Jamie, and find a suitable spot, or spots. If they do not suit you there is always the ocean. I'll leave that up to you. But you must kill Harper and Hurtada separately, if you can, and nobody must see you do it. That is very important. I want them to vanish into thin air, with no trace. How you do it is your business. After all, you must expect to do *something* for twenty thousand dollars." The Bitch rolled over close to him and stroked his biceps with her fingertips. "I was right about you, Jamie. You would have made a marvelous gladiator." Heat glowed in the green eyes now. Nick groaned inwardly. The Bitch was in estrus again. He felt a sudden overwhelming desire to go to the bathroom.

He slipped from under the sheets on his side of the bed. "Sorry, but I got to see a man about—"

"Wait," said the woman sharply. "Wait!"

It was too late. Nick's bare feet touched the floor and all hell broke loose. Gongs clanged all around the room and in the arches of the ceiling. The AXEman stared, showing more surprise than he felt, as Gerda von Rothe slipped her hand beneath the bed and threw an invisible switch. The harsh clangor ceased. The woman frowned at Nick for a moment, then, with a rare good humor, she smiled. "You can close your mouth now, Jamie. It was only the alarm. When it's on no one can approach the bed or leave it without setting off the gongs. The floor is wired." Her smile faded to petulance. "But of course it will bring Erma, damn it!"

"Who's Erma?" Nick was still putting on the bewildered act. Secretly he was very pleased. It was good to know about the alarm; not so good to know that you couldn't get *out* of bed with it turned on. That was going to cut down on his own personal and private prowling — unless he could find a way to trick the alarm.

The huge double doors of the bedroom were flung open with a crash. Nick saw who Erma was. She was Miss Five by Five of 1966. She could have played fullback for the Green Bay Packers. Her hair was yellow, streaked with gray, and coiled around her head in a massive coronet. She wore a man's sport shirt, with the tail outside her pants. Not slacks, but regular men's trousers. Her biceps, displayed by the short sleeves, were nearly as big as Nick's own, and looked as hard. Her face was red and blobby and Nick could have sworn she had cauliflower ears. Just at the moment he was more interested in the Luger she clutched in one square hand. It looked a bit like his own 9-

mm. that he had not been permitted to bring, but this weapon had not been stripped and appeared brand new. It was sighted dead on his naked belly.

Nick decided to play it for laughs. He wanted The Bitch to continue thinking of him as a cool customer, if a little dumb. He said, as he slowly put up his hands, "Don't shoot — don't shoot! I wasn't doing nothing, really. It's all a mistake." And he winked at Gerda.

Erma looked from Nick to her mistress. The Luger did not deviate from its unwinking scrutiny of Nick's belly button. Erma had yellow eyes, yellow like a cat's.

"It's all right," Gerda von Rothe said. "It *was* a mistake, Erma. He didn't know about the alarm and I forgot to turn it off. You may go."

Erma looked at Nick. Her yellow gaze started at his feet and moved very slowly upward. Her eyes lingered for a long time taking in every inch of his body before her big wet mouth twisted in disgust. Nor was there any mistaking the blaze of hatred in the yellow eyes when at last she looked the AXEman full in the face.

Erma swung around and marched out of the room. The big doors crashed shut. She had not spoken a word.

Nick looked at The Bitch. "That woman don't like me," he said.

She laughed. "No. She hates all men. She's in love with me — and something of a nuisance at times. But she has her good points. For one, she is an excellent bodyguard. She used to be a wrestler in Germany. I would not advise even you to take liberties with Erma, my Jamie." The Bitch patted back a yawn. "But Erma is not a bad sort — every now and then, when I am on the point of death from boredom, I let her make love to me. It keeps her happy for months."

Killmaster played it dumb. He was supposed to be an unsophisticated jerk. "I don't get it," he said. "She's a *woman!*"

"And you're a big handsome ape," said the woman almost fondly. "With an ape's brain. Go on to the bathroom if you must, then hurry back. I find myself in need of you again."

She pointed an imperious finger at Nick. "You were good last night, I admit, but I am sure you are better when you are sober. Now hurry." It was an order.

The bathroom, Nick reckoned, was only about a quarter the size of the bedroom. All the fixtures were of solid gold. There were magnificent Turkish rugs scattered on the mosaic floor. There was a small swimming pool instead of a tub, a dozen huge mirrors, and the sanitation facilities were Oriental. A glittering tile slit trench with a chromium bar for squatting. Much more conducive to good health than the Western style.

Both heating and lighting were indirect. There was no way out of the bathroom except the door. This he had needed to know.

Nick sank into a bath chair by the pool and pondered for a moment. The Bitch was going to give him the run of the castle, so he could learn the terrain, as it were, and plan the killings. He would be watched constantly. He would bet on that! But he would cross that bridge when he got to it.

Nick glanced at his wrist watch. He saw the hour hand twitch and spin as the DF went to work. That hidden transmitter was sending again!

The AXEman faced the bathroom door, studying the watch, trying to get a fix in relation to the bedroom. He visualized the room and remembered the tall mullioned windows. They would be to his left as he went out. And now the hour hand was pointing in that direction, quivering slightly. He must see what lay outside those windows.

"Jamie!" It was a bellow.

"Coming," Nick muttered under his breath, "coming, Oh noble Bitch. Thy good and faithful servant obeys. Spare me the lash, Oh Bitch of Bitches!"

His grin, just before he opened the bathroom door, was hard and more than a little cruel. He found himself wishing *El Tigre* all the luck in the world with his project of rape. Thinking of *El Tigre* made him glance at his watch again. The DF was still working, but the minute hand was at five of something. Noon, hadn't it been? *El Tigre* and his men were due at dusk. That should be about nine in this season. *El Tigre* was trusting Nick to clear the way for his attack.

As he made his way back to the swan bed he shot a covert glance at the tall windows. The DF was still reacting, pointing in that direction; it was a long transmission, then. Much longer than usual. Maybe the CIA could get a better fix. Maybe even the boys in *Homer* could get a fix. Yeah, maybe. A lot of things could happen before any possible help could get to him. Help? Foolish boy! This was a solo job — so he had undertaken it and so it must be. He either won or lost it all alone. Except for *El Tigre.* Nick had no illusions about *El Tigre.*

Gerda von Rothe was waiting impatiently, a full-blown golden Venus on the swan bed. Her hard plump legs were parted and Nick saw then what he had not seen before — the little swatch was as silver, as glimmering and iridescent, as the mane above. By God — could she possibly really be seventy years old!

The Bitch was an immediate person who did not believe in foreplay. She seized the AXE agent with an. amazingly strong grasp and thrust him beneath her. "You underneath," she said curtly.

And so it was. She took her fill of him, screamed a little, then slumped off to one side. "I will sleep now," she said quietly. "For a little time I will sleep. So it is always with me. You will not disturb me for anything."

And sleep she did. The perfectly natural sleep of a satisfied animal. Nick listened to the deep regular breathing for a moment, put a tentative foot out of the bed, then drew it back. Give her five minutes. And hope to God she had not switched on the alarm again. He needed a little luck just now.

He lay with his hands clasped beneath his head and stared at the ceiling. The speaker was mute. The projector was blind. He wondered what had happened to his clothes. His "cover" clothes, the filthy long johns and the rest — and where was the Webley? He was buck naked in a witch's castle. Surrounded by alarms and dogs and guards — and don't forget Brünnhilde with the Luger. She would just love to put a slug in him.

The AXE agent crinkled his eyes and hummed, very softly — "They'll never believe me when I tell them, and I'm certainly going to tell them — dum-dum-da-dum—"

Five minutes had passed. The woman still slept. Nick eased out of bed. The alarm did not sound. He went to the tall windows, pulled the drapes and stared out. There was no escape this way. To his right and left he could see crenellated towers. Between them, below the windows, the scarp fell away sheer to the foam-washed rocks below. Those jagged gray teeth, he guessed, were a good two hundred feet down. No exit!

To his right, to the north, he could see a complex of low white buildings, so situated in a natural declivity in the cliff that they had not been visible when he spied with the glasses. They would not, he thought, even be visible from the road. They were squat, one-story affairs — five of them — and looked fairly new.

As he watched he saw two men in long white gowns leave one of the buildings and walk to another, talking and gesticulating. The long gowns were such as laboratory technicians might wear. Nothing so unusual there, Nick conceded. The buildings *could* be laboratories where The Bitch worked out new formulas for skin creams and other aids to beauty and eternal youth. Could be. What made it unlikely was the little tableau he now saw enacted.

As the two men reached the door of a building an armed guard stepped into sight and stopped them. Nick wished fervently for his glasses, yet his own superb eyesight served well enough for him to see that this guard was different from those on the gate. This man was either a *mestizo* — or a Chinese! He was dressed in khaki shirt and shorts, knee socks and what looked like heavy army shoes. He wore a flat, vizored cap without insignia. But it was the guard's manner that most impressed the AXE agent — there was a military snap and stance about the man as he examined credentials.

Nick Carter whistled very softly. There *was* Chinese military

personnel in Mexico. And the security was tough — those two men had had to show credentials just to pass from one building to another. As though they were captive workers not to be trusted out of sight.

Behind him Gerda von Rothe stirred on the swan bed and moaned in her sleep. Nick ran for the bathroom.

He took a bath in the pool, splashing and swimming a few strokes, and showered away the soap. He was keen and alert now, the mescal only a bilious memory. He found a small cabinet with its own special shaving mirror and light, containing everything a man might need for his toilet Everything was expensive, the very best. Nick grimaced at himself in the glass as he stroked away the black stubble. It figured. He was betting there would be some men's clothing around, too.

She was awake when he came out of the bathroom. She gave him a small smile as he came to within six feet of the bed and stopped. There was approval in her glance, Nick thought, approval and something else. A hint of regret? Was she going to hate to kill him after he had done her dirty work?

"I had no idea," said The Bitch after a moment, "that you were so handsome under that beard. Your face matches the rest of you, Jamie. You are positively a ravishing brute." Her green eyes swept lightly over his body without lingering and Nick breathed a little easier. She was satiated — at least for the moment.

"I can't do much this way," he told her. "I need some clothes. Where are mine?"

"I had Erma burn them, of course." She pointed. "Press that button set into the wall near the bathroom door."

Nick did so. A panel slid back in the wall to disclose a long, deep closet. Neatly arranged on hangers was a long row of men's suits and slacks. Dozens of both. They bore London, Paris, Rome and New York labels. Nothing but the finest for *La Perra's* studs, thought Nick.

A third of the closet was devoted to shelves on which were stacked shirts, socks, underwear, costly ties still in their boxes. Beneath the shelves were at least fifty pairs of shoes of every size and type. Everything was new. Naturally. When she got rid of her itinerant paramours she would bury them — if she bothered to bury them — in the clothes they wore at time of death.

"Select anything you want," she said from the bed. "Get dressed and- remain here until I send for you. Then we will have breakfast and talk some more."

She left the bed and slipped on a robe and put her feet into high-heeled mules. She went toward the double doors. Over her shoulder she said, "Remember, Jamie — do not try to leave until I send for you. There will be a guard outside. It is for your protection. There may be

spies among my own people, and I don't want Harper and Hurtada to know you are here until the last minute. When it is too late. We must be very careful."

As she opened the door Nick caught a glimpse of an armed guard sitting in a chair tilted back against the wall. He leaped to his feet as The Bitch came out. He wore a dark gray uniform, a highly polished Sam Browne and the silver insignia of the lily glinted on his cap. Peeking from the buttoned-down holster was the heavy butt of a .45 automatic.

Nick saw the man click his heels and salute the woman as she passed. She paid no attention. Then the door swung shut.

As he went about selecting his clothes, Nick Carter was very much deep in thought. The more he learned about this strange setup the screwier it got — yet he could, was just beginning to, catch a glimmer of what was going on. Like a figure seen through several feet of semi-opaque water, as through a glass darkly, he was beginning to make out the outline of events. It appeared to be, indeed, a palace revolution.

Two distinct sets of guards. One set was military and — he was betting on it — Chinese; the other set was para-military and owed allegiance to Gerda von Rothe. She had been expecting help — Neo-Nazi help. Harper and Hurtada had forestalled that, so the von Rothe had taken a daring gamble — Nick's smile was cold — and retained what she thought was a beautiful, and mindless brute to protect her. Protect her? He had to chuckle at that. She needed protection the way a tigress or a black widow needed it.

The fact remained that he had stumbled into a minor civil war, an internecine struggle for stakes about which he knew very little — except that they must be high. Terribly high.

Nick selected a pair of gray Daks, suede shoes with rubber soles, a shirt of Irish linen with short sleeves and a light tan bush jacket. He knotted a white silk scarf about his throat and buttoned the jacket over it. Contemplating himself in a mirror he thought that perhaps he looked a bit too much the sophisticate — it was not his fault that he wore casual clothes so well — and was tempted to change, then thought the hell with it. The Bitch was going to be pretty busy. She would not have time to become suspicious. Probably she would not even notice, and if she did she would merely think it a case of a rough diamond coming out well when polished.

Nick could still taste the mescal in the back of his mouth. He went into the bathroom again and once more cleaned his teeth and gargled. He went to the tall windows again and looked out. The sun had gone now and a mass of black clouds was piling in the west. A storm was moving in from the Pacific. As he watched the somber ramparts of

cloud build and writhe, he felt a sudden strange coldness in him. There were many ludicrous aspects to this mission, he admitted that, but at the end of the affair Death would be waiting. For whom? For how many?

Lightning scribbled pale fire across one of the looming thunderheads. Thunder came along, sullen and threatening. Nick let the drape fall and turned toward the door just as it opened. The guard crooked a finger at him.

“Come. You are wanted.”

Chapter 9
Instant Murder

After a lavish breakfast — Nick had not realized how famished he was — served from a buffet before an open fire in a huge refectory, with transparent bone china and vermeil, Gerda von Rothe took Nick down a series of long dank passages to what she called the library. It was a tremendous room with a ceiling like that of a cathedral. It was lined with books, thousands of books, and there were wheeled ladders to reach the top shelves. Seated before another fireplace, in which you could have roasted several oxen — it was always dank and chill in the castle, she said, in spite of the central heating — they talked. But first The Bitch gave him back the Webley and his hunting knife, which she took from the drawer of a huge Louis Quinze desk.

As she handed them to him she said, "You will use your own weapons, Jamie. The knife would be more silent, but you must use your own judgment. If you use this gun and there is ever any trouble, your bullets will be found in the corpses. It seems most unique, your revolver. I have never seen one like it. Where did you get it?"

"I stole it from a guy," he said gruffly. "A long time ago. It can't never be traced to me, so don't worry."

"I am not worrying." She tapped his chin with a thin black leather riding crop she was carrying. She would, he imagined, always be carrying some sort of whip or goad. She would probably feel naked without one. Just another facet of her nasty personality, of this incredible gothic *persona.*

She had changed into slacks and simple white blouse, and her silver hair was again caught back with the golden bangle. On her feet were highly polished black flats.

"I have been thinking." And she told him what she had been thinking. A faint chill coiled up and down Kill-master's spine. She was going to force his hand.

"Why wait?" The wide scarlet mouth smiled at him, the big white teeth glinted. "This room is huge and the books will absorb most of the sounds you make. I suppose," she sounded regretful, "that you will have to use the gun after all. You will not be able to surprise them and get close enough to use the knife. No — it will just have to be with the gun. I'll lock the door when I leave and give orders that no one is to enter this room. When you're finished I'll come and help you with the bodies."

Nick stared at her. He let his mouth drop open. "You mean you want me to do it *here?* In this room. Right away?"

She drew the tip of the riding crop across his face. “Why not, Jamie? The sooner the better. I should have thought of it before. You see, I’m supposed to see them today to discuss business, and we always do that in this room. I’ll give them a few drinks first, to relax them and get them off guard, then I’ll make some excuse and leave the room. Then you do it. Very simple.”

“Not so damned simple.” He couldn’t pretend to be that dumb! Not even Jamie McPherson was that dumb.

“How will you explain me? They don’t know who I am — they don’t even know I’m in the castle. They’ll be suspicious the minute they see me. You said they knew how to take care of themselves, Gerda. Anyway look!” Nick put the big Webley in his belt and pulled the bush jacket over it. “See? It sticks out like a sore thumb. Those guys would spot it in a minute. No — you better let me figure out my own time and place. I—”

Whistttttt — the riding crop cut across his lean cheek. Not hard enough to draw blood but with a hurting sting. Nick took a step back, fighting for self control. If he lost his temper now he would ruin everything. He cringed. “Hey — don’t! That hurt. I was only trying to —”

“Don’t,” The Bitch said softly. “I told you — don’t try to think. I’ll do that. There is so much you don’t know, Jamie. Come here and I’ll show you how you can take them by surprise.”

He followed her to a shelf of books near the fireplace, saw her press a spatulate finger against the spine of a book. It was Dickens’ *Dombey and Son.*

A small section of the wall swung open noiselessly. She stood aside for him to enter first. It was a tight little cubicle, unheated, lined with dark paneling. Gerda pulled the section of shelves shut behind her. The washed and perfumed odor of her big golden body filled the tiny space. If sex had a distinctive smell of its own, Nick mused, this was it.

She was pointing to a narrow slit in the wall. “Take a look, Jamie.”

He found that he could see most of the library. Some of the books were shorter than others, and the space above them was covered with a fine black netting. She touched his shoulder and pointed to a set of earphones hanging from a nail set into the paneling. “With those you can hear everything that is said in the library. But they won’t be able to hear, and they can’t see you because of the netting. All you have to do is wait until I leave — I don’t want to be a witness to the actual killing, you see — then pick your time and open the section and go in and kill them. It should be easy. They’ll never suspect. They know nothing of this room.”

He nodded grudgingly. “Yeah. Like shooting fish in a barrel. So when do I do it?”

“Right away. Why delay? It’s storming outside now and the visibility is bad. They may not even be seen coming here from the labs. Not that it matters. They’ll simply disappear, not be seen again.” She touched his face with the riding crop. “You take care of those two, Jamie. I’ll take care of... of the others.”

And you’ll take care of me, too. No doubt of that. Aloud, he said, “That part bothers me a little, Gerda. They’ve got friends, huh? What happens when they turn up missing?”

Tap — tap — the leather of the crop cold on his cheek. “I told you. I’ll handle that. I can promise you, Jamie. When they are gone the, er, friends will go also. They will just pack up and leave. All right — I’m going to call now and tell Harper and Hurtada I want to see them. You will stay here. Any last questions?”

He could think of none. The time for questions was over. From now on it was going to be a deadly rat race and each man, or woman, for himself. Then a thought struck him. “Better test the earphones,” he told her. “I don’t want nothing to go wrong.”

“Nor do I.” She leaned close to him, pressing her big body, the full, tilting breasts, against him. Her lips moved across his cheek. “Don’t bungle it, Jamie. You know what happens to you if you do. But if you do it right I’ll show you what Paradise is like.”

She pressed a small lever and the bookshelves swung open. She went out and they closed. He watched her through the slit in the books. She went to the desk, then turned and stared at the shelves. “Can you hear me? If you can, rap on the paneling.”

Her voice was small, metallic, but quite clear. He rapped on the wall and saw her nod. She picked up a phone on the desk and dialed once. She waited, patting one foot, tapping on the desk with the riding crop, a sullen frown on her arrogant face.

“Harper? This is Gerda.” She was scowling at the phone. “I must see you at once. You and Hurtada both. Yes, of course it’s important or I would not bother. Yes, damn it. I said it was. Both of you come to the library as soon as possible. We must have a talk. Right away, damn it!”

The Bitch slammed down the phone. She looked at the bookshelves and winked, then went to a tall cabinet in a corner of the library and took out bottles and glasses. Nick could hear her humming softly as she went about her preparations. One of Brahms’ short pieces from *Liebeslieder*. What a character she was — made Lady Macbeth look like a saint!

It would be a few minutes before the two men arrived. Nick made good use of the time. He played a hunch. It was dark in the little

room, and he had no matches or lighter, so he had to feel around the paneling in the dark. He kept the earphones on — luckily the flex was long enough for roaming.

If there was a back way out of this hidey hole — and he was betting there was — it should be in the back panel. He felt over the slick wood with his fingertips, pressing and rapping gently, listening for hollowness. Nothing. He kept trying. He was about to give up in despair when his fingers touched a slight protuberance in the paneling, a scroll or arabesque of some sort. He pressed it, heard a faint clicking noise, and a section of the paneling slid back. A waft of dank air swept over his face, smelling of mold and dust and old bones. He had found his way out. God only knew where it led. Probably to some charnel pit where the Dragon waited.

He left the panel open and went back to the eye slit. Gerda von Rothe was seated at the desk, sipping at a highball and tapping her big round thigh with the quirt. Without looking in his direction she said: "They'll be here any minute now, Jamie. Just keep your mind on the job and do it quickly, get it over. And remember — they're very tough. Don't give them a chance!"

There was a tapping on the library door. The Bitch shot a glance at the hidey hole and said, very softly, "Here they are now. *Gut Glück*, Jamie." He had noted before how she lapsed into German when she was excited. He watched her vanish into the blind spot at the end of the library. Cold air was blowing in from the tunnel behind him, chilling the back of his neck. Why not take off right now? Start his exploration — it might take him hours to find his way from the castle to those lab buildings — and he was going to need every minute. Yet he lingered. If the scene coming up was going to be an angry one, as he hoped, he might pick up some valuable information that would save him time in the long run.

Gerda von Rothe came back into view followed by Maxwell Harper and the *mestizo* — Chinese, Hurtada. Nick wondered what the man was called in Peking. Today he was wearing one of the long white lab gowns over a cardigan and dark trousers. He was bare headed, the raven dark hair close cropped.

Harper was wearing the same snapbrim panama. He did not take it off. His lightweight suit was beautifully cut, a pearly gray, and a bright tie sparkled against his dazzling white shirt front. The AXEman, missing nothing, saw that Harper liked his collars starched — the sharp edges were cutting into the pink hanging jowls. Harper, he thought again, looked like a well-bathed and barbered pig. But he did not underestimate the man. He could see the faint bulge of a shoulder clip beneath the beautiful suit. Of the two men, he thought now, Harper might well be the more dangerous. Simply because he didn't

look it.

The voices came through the earphones, diminished but perfectly clear.

"So what's it all about, Gerda?" Harper's voice was hoarse. "Make it snappy, will you! I've got to get back to Mexico City tonight to catch a plane for Los Angeles. What's wrong?"

Hurtada said nothing. Harper slumped into a chair near the desk but Hurtada paced nervously to and fro, shooting narrow dark glances at the other two. He gave the impression of extreme agitation.

The AXE agent waited with interest for what Gerda would say. She had to hand them some line, some stall, to account for summoning them. What? Some truth or a tissue of lies? He kept his eyes glued to the dark netting.

Gerda von Rothe poured drinks and handed them around. Harper drank deeply. Hurtada tasted his, made a face and put it down.

"Everything is wrong and you know it!" The Bitch faced the two men. She kept slapping the riding crop against her palm. "Things have been all wrong since that fool Vargas stole the counterfeit and got away. That is bound to lead to trouble sooner or later. I want you two to pack up your operation and get out of here!"

Harper shot an amused glance at Hurtada, took another drink, then laughed at Gerda. "Christ, is that all? You got us up here for that? I told you we've talked it over, Hurtada and I, and we've decided there is no great risk. Believe me, Gerda, we've figured all the angles. If that money could be traced back to us we would have known it by now. So stop worrying. Just be a good girl and play along the way you've been doing. That way everyone stays healthy. Anyway this operation isn't going to last forever. We'll go away one day and leave you alone."

The woman slammed her riding crop down on the desk. "You'll ruin me," she screamed. "You'll ruin everything I've built over all these years. I tell you I won't have it. I want you out of here." She glowered at Hurtada. "Take your filthy Chink soldiers and put them back on your submarine where they belong. Take them back to China! I've had enough."

The watching Nick Carter frowned in puzzlement. This had a ring of truth about it. Was her anger genuine or an act? Had she forgotten that he was listening? Then he understood — she didn't care what he heard now. Jamie McPherson was a dumb bastard, remember? And it didn't matter for another reason — he was never going to leave *El Mirador* alive.

Hurtada had not yet spoken. Now he fixed the woman with cold black eyes and said, "I do not understand this at all, Gerda. Why are you making this scene? It makes no sense. I thought it was all

understood — you cannot betray us, or even cause us trouble, without betraying yourself. Do you think we do not know about your friends in Brazil? Is it possible that you think us so stupid that we would not take precautions?"

Maxwell Harper laughed. "What he means, Gerda, is that you can stop looking for your Nazi pal from Brazil. I'm afraid he won't be showing up."

Nick was sure now that Gerda von Rothe had temporarily forgotten him. The deadly weakness of arrogance — and the Germanic *hubris* is far worse than the Greek ever was — is that it cannot abide to be taunted. Gerda seemed to swell, to actually gain in stature. She went livid and in that instant her face lost its beauty and took on a gargoyle ugliness. She smashed at Harper's glass, sweeping it from the desk with her crop.

"So that's it! You *did* kill him!"

The American shrugged his big shoulders. "If you mean the guy who called himself Siegfried, yes, we did. Or rather I did. We figured he was a gunman, an executioner you had sent for, Gerda, so we played it safe. You get some very nasty ideas at times, my dear woman. I wish you wouldn't."

The woman appeared to regain her control, at least partially. She leaned toward Harper. "How did you know he was Siegfried? He would never have told you. Never! He was one of our best men."

Harper was lighting a short black cigar. He beamed jovially through blue smoke at Gerda. "He did, though. Hurtada persuaded him. Burnt his feet a little with a cigarette lighter. Before we finished with him he was anxious to talk — he wanted to tell us his entire pedigree and the details of his love life." Harper chuckled. "Hurtada is very good with fire. Not very subtle, though, especially for a Chinese."

"Enough of this nonsense," snapped Hurtada. He fixed The Bitch with a cold black stare. "We, I, expect absolute obedience from you from now on. No more messages to Brazil. They cannot help you. It is the Serpent Party, with Chinese backing, that is going to take over Mexico. *Not* the new Nazi party. You had better make up your mind to that, woman."

Nick could see the tremors running through her big frame. She was as pale as a corpse, her mouth a stark red slash. With a sudden fierce movement she broke the riding crop in two. "You dare to talk to *me* like that? You dare! Here, on my own ground!"

"I dare," said Hurtada softly. "From now on you will take orders like anyone else. I am running things now."

It was fascinating. Nick had trouble restraining his glee as he watched and listened. Pieces of the jigsaw were falling into place with crisp satisfying sounds.

He happened to be watching Harper's face as Hurtada made his last statement. He read surprise and shock on the fat pink features.

"Since when?" growled Harper. "Since when are you running things, Hurtada? I haven't heard anything about it." Both of them were ignoring The Bitch now. There was an almost visible tension between them. Nick rubbed his hands together. This kept getting better and better.

Hurtada took a yellow flimsy from his pocket and tossed it at Harper. "Since just one hour ago, my friend. This was relayed to me from the *Sea Dragon.* From Peking."

Boingggggg — right on target again. There *was* a Chinese sub lurking off the California and Mexican coasts.

Harper glanced at the flimsy. His lip curled. He threw the paper to the floor. "It's in code groups. You know I can't read this code. How do I know you're telling the truth? You could be lying! You've been wanting to take over ever since this operation began."

Nick switched his scrutiny to The Bitch. She was quiet now, peering from one man to the other, apparently sensing the deep friction between them, alert for any opening the friction might afford her. She had regained her composure and her face was placid. She still had Jamie, her ace in the hole. What matter how these two quarreled? They would both be dead in a few minutes. Nick could see her mind working behind that lovely arrogant façade.

She did not have to make an excuse to leave. Hurtada, never taking his eyes from Harper, made it for her. He said: "Please to leave us alone for a little time, Gerda. There are some matters I must discuss with my friend here. In private. I will speak to you later about what we have been discussing."

A made-to-order exit cue. Gerda von Rothe skirted the desk and started for the door. She cast a single glance in Nick's direction. He saw the green eyes flicker, a barely perceptible movement, yet the message was loud and clear. Get on with it, Jamie boy. Murder! Blood! I wish to find two warm corpses when I return...

She passed out of sight. From the door he heard her say: "There is one other thing — my guards report a lot of movement in the hills across the highway. Bandits, they think. We must not overlook—"

"Screw the bandits," said Harper loudly. "Just so it's not the police. We can handle bandits all right, for God's sake. Between our guards and yours we've got machine guns all over the place. So who cares about a few lousy bandits!"

"I thought you should know." The door closed behind her. The oily *cluck* of the lock came through the earphones. Nick hardly heard it. His eyes were glued to the slit in the wall.

Hurtada walked around the desk to where The Bitch had been

standing. He was fast. So fast that even Nick Carter's experienced eye could not see where the little automatic had been concealed. It was a .32, deadly enough at that short range, and Hurtada was pointing it at Harper.

"Your little game is all over," said Hurtada. "You fat bastard. You pig! I should have known all along."

Nick gave the American credit. He did not flinch. He sat, a new drink at his side, and stared at the gun in Hurtada's hand. "What in hell are you talking about, Chung? What's the matter with you? You sore because I questioned your word on that code message? Okay — I take it back. You're in command now. Good luck to you. Now I've got to get started for Mexico City or I'll miss my plane. I have got a business to look after, you know. I've got to keep up a front, make it look good. So if you'll excuse me—"

Harper started to get up. Hurtada, or Chung Hee, jabbed the gun at him. "Do not move. And do not bother to lie. Peking knows the truth about you at last and they have passed it on to me." Chung indicated the yellow flimsy on the floor beside Harper. "Besides giving me command of the mission, Peking notified me that you are a double agent. I have authority to dispose of you as I see fit."

Nick would cheerfully have nominated Maxwell Harper for an Oscar. The man was superb. He settled back in his chair and frowned at Chung Hee.

"I just don't get this! Have you lost your mind? Or has Peking? If this is your idea of a joke, Chung, then you picked a damned poor time to—"

"Be quiet," hissed the Chinese. "No use trying to lie yourself out of it, Harper. Peking has proof that you are a Russian agent, have been one for years. Ever since the Serpent Party was set up, you fat bastard, you have been feeding the Kremlin information about it. And you have been sabotaging it! I understand now what I could not understand before. Why our progress was so slow, why we lost so many good party leaders to the police on trumped-up charges. Why the distribution of the counterfeit was so mishandled — though surely your real bosses would profit by that, too! With care, with a little cunning, we could still be circulating the bad money in the States and reaping good money to finance the Party. But you insisted on dumping it all at once. And no wonder you were not very concerned about the drunk, about Vargas. If he was caught and loused up the Party all the better for you. Well, pig, you have earned your Kremlin pay — and you have earned your death!"

Harper's bulk and fat fooled even Nick. He would have bet on Chung Hee. He would have lost.

Harper flung his glass at the Chinese in a blur of motion. Chung

ducked and fired, but in ducking he lost balance and his sighting. He missed Harper's gut and got him high on the right arm. Harper went sprawling into the shelter of the big desk and fired around the corner. The heavy black gun leaped and bellowed in his hand. Chung managed to get off one more shot and chips flew from the desk. Chung dropped the .32 and walked slowly backward, clutching at his belly with both hands. He stared down with amazed dark eyes at the scarlet leaking between his fingers. It was plain that he did not believe it.

Harper came out of his crouch behind the desk and walked slowly toward the still retreating Chung. He leveled the black pistol. The Chinese held out his hands, palms up, in entreaty and as though he hoped to seize the bullets before they could harm him.

Harper shot him three times in the belly at close range. The blast whirled Chung around and flung him against the bookcases. He slid down, his clutching fingers slipping and sliding on the spines of the books, leaving a bloody trail. He flopped once like a gaffed fish and turned over on his face, still twitching. Harper shot him again in the back of the head.

If The Bitch was listening, and Nick was pretty sure she was, she would be exulting now. She would think that Jamie had come through for her. And she would be here any minute.

He watched Harper take off his jacket and examine the wound in his upper arm. The freshly laundered shirt was turning red. Harper fished for a handkerchief, made a pad of it, and pressed it against the wound. Then he took a spare clip from his pocket and reloaded his gun. Nick nodded in cold professional approval. He very much doubted that The Bitch was going to catch this character off guard. A sly and slippery one, and tough; Nick had no doubt whatever that Chung Hee had been right. Peking was right. Harper *was* a double. Working for both the Kremlin and Peking. Where his real allegiance lay if he had any, did not much matter. Men such as Harper worked for money, and money only. He probably had his own ideas about the counterfeit and the plates.

Nick turned and stepped into the cold tunnel. He found a lever that closed the panel behind him. The Bitch would know where he had gone, of course, but he had a head start. And he had some ideas of his own.

Chapter 10
Bluebeard Was a Piker

The narrow tunnel led back to a flight of stone stairs that spiraled down into fetid gloom. Nick felt his way cautiously. When he had gone down some two hundred feet he saw a faint glow of light and heard the whirring *zum-zum-zum*— What?

Dynamos, of course. Gerda von Rothe would not depend on the vagaries of Mexican power. She would have her own generators, primary and auxiliary.

He reached the bottom of the stairs and halted. At the end of a short passage was a brilliantly lit room, from whence came the dynamo sounds. Nick could see the shadow of a man on the corridor floor. The shadow was sitting, just inside the door of the lighted room. As the AXEman listened he could hear a faint rustle of pages being turned. A bored guard, reading to pass the time.

Nick Carter's grin was hard. Things are due to liven up a bit, bub! He went down the passage like a ghost. It would have to be fast. He had no way of knowing what was going on up in the castle — whether Harper and the Bitch had declared open war and fought it out, or had joined forces and were in full hue and cry after him. A lot depended on the woman's reaction to Chung Hee's death. She might try to take Harper. She might tell him about Nick. She might not. Nick shrugged it off — no matter to him. He was off and running and there was no stopping now.

Taking the guard was child's play. He slipped around the door like a wraith and had the hunting knife at the man's throat. "Not a sound," Nick whispered. "Not a move or I'll cut your throat. Got it?"

The guard nodded tensely. He had it. Nick zipped the Colt .45 from the man's holster and stuck it into his own belt. "Good boy," he whispered. "Just keep it up and you may live to tell about this."

He took a half step back and brought the callused edge of his right hand down on the man's neck in a vicious karate chop. Nick could break a hundred-pound chunk of ice with the blow.

"Beddy go, fella," Nick breathed softly. He made a swift inspection of the room, found a roll of flex and bound the guard. He gagged the man with his own handkerchief. Then he ran swiftly down the passage to the foot of the stairs and listened. No pursuit yet. Of course, the Bitch knew her own castle. She might come another way.

Nick thought of the dogs then, of Damon and Pythias, the vicious Dobermans, and cursed under his breath. His old clothes! She wouldn't have burnt all of them. Something would have been kept

back to give the dogs his scent.

He ran back to the generator room. Now to wreck a little havoc, raise a lot of hell. He went swiftly around the room; it was lined with switchboards and metal boxes, a maze of electrical paraphernalia. Nick had taken a powerful five-celled flashlight from the guard. He threw every switch he could find into the OFF position, grinning as he worked. This was going to cause a little commotion upstairs and in the lab buildings. If the labs got their power from the same source. He could only hope so.

Nick threw another switch into OFF and the lights in the room went out. Good. He used the flashlight and finished with the switches, gave the bound guard a friendly nudge with his toe, and left the room.

He turned to his right, away from the stairs, and used the flashlight to follow a sheaf of cables that led away down another passage. Hopefully to the labs. The cables were attached to the dank stone walls by brackets, a veritable fascia of them — surely so many could only mean they serviced the labs. He was gambling on it. Otherwise he might wander for hours in the sub-basements and dungeons of this Gothic monstrosity.

Nick came hard up against a huge iron door. It was locked. The cables disappeared through a V slot cut into the top of the door.

The AXEman put his enormous strength to the door in vain. It did not budge. Realization of what he had done seeped into him then and he felt a little sick in his gut. He had made a mistake. A bad mistake!

He headed back for the generator room, running with all his might. He cursed himself with every step. He couldn't *afford,* such slips — many more, even one more, might get him very dead.

He put the flashlight on the still unconscious guard and searched him, a thing he should have done before. There they were — a ring of keys. One was extra large, old fashioned. It would be the one to open the iron door. Nick slipped the keys into his pocket and was starting back when he saw the first shaft of light strike the bottom of the stairs. He heard voices. They were after him already.

He needed a few moments to get through the iron door and he would have to fight for them. He ran tiptoe down the short passage to the foot of the stairs, the guard's .45 in his hand. A bright pool of light splashed at his feet. They had just come around the last turn in the spiral stairs. Nick leaned around the corner and let go with the .45.

The Colt sounded like heavy artillery in the narrow space. The light went out and they came bouncing down the stairs. A man screamed. There was the scurry of hastily retreating footsteps. The Bitch wasn't paying them enough to make them face such a deadly ambush.

Nick waited a moment. He could hear muted sounds from above.

He risked a glimpse with his own light and saw the body of a guard sprawled head down on the stairs. Blood, like a miniature waterfall, was dripping down the stairs.

Someone fired at the lance of Nick's light on the walls. The slug whined around like a leaden bee gone mad. Nick emptied his pistol up the stairs, trying to bounce the bullets off the wall and around the turn in the stairs. He heard a yelp of pain. He turned and ran back down the passage. That should hold them for a few minutes.

The big key opened the iron door. The lock was well oiled. Nick slipped through and locked the door behind him. His back trail was safe now for a while — it would take them hours to get through that door, even with an acetylene torch — but the thought brought him little comfort. If his hunch was right and the cables led to the lab buildings, they would know where he was headed. They would try to beat him there. All he had really gained was a few minutes while they hesitated back at the stairs.

He saw immediately that he was now in the oldest part of the castle. The passage sloped continually downward and the walls were covered with slime and trickling water. This was not a basement but a dungeon, carved out of the living rock of the cliff on which *El Mirador* stood.

Rats scuttled ahead of him as he made his way always downward. He wondered if the rats had gone blind after generations, as some fish did who lived in caves and never saw the light.

He came to the first cell. The door was of iron with a narrow barred grille in it. Nick put the beam of the flashlight through the aperture — and caught his breath. Instant revulsion sparked through him like an electric current as he examined the grisly sight. He had seen worse, but not much, and not often.

The dead man chained to the rear wall of the cell was not yet quite a skeleton. He would, Nick told himself as he fought off nausea, have been the last to be put in here. Bones glinted white and blue through the badly decomposed flesh. The rats, disturbed for a moment at their feeding, glared into the light; then, seeing no danger, sensing that the stranger would not intrude, they turned again to their feeding.

Rats do not eat cloth. Nick saw that the dead man was beautifully dressed. The press was still in the trousers. The suit looked like Regent or Bond Street. It had not been long out of the closet in Gerda von Rothe's spacious bedroom. The poor bastard wearing it now, Nick thought, had not been able to satisfy The Bitch for long. He remembered the words of *El Tigre*: "We have seen her take many men into the castle — we have never seen any of the men come out!"

So now he knew. He was dealing with a psychopath, a mad

woman. The thought that she might really be seventy years old gave him another chill — for all those years to roam the world, killing and torturing, yet somehow retaining her own beauty.

There were rats in the next cell also, but they were faring badly. Not much left. Nick went rapidly down the line of cells. There were six of them. Four of them contained skeletons chained to the walls. The white and well-polished bones glittered in the beam of his flashlight. Each skeleton was beautifully dressed. At least she did not stint on the tailoring bills, he thought. She was generous that way, as witness his own expensive raiment at the moment. Pick them up, clothe them, feed them, enjoy them — and kill them. That was her MO, the *modus operandi.* They were probably chained and left to starve to death. Hitch-hikers, bums, transients passing through, lonely men with no families to inquire, to touch off embarrassing investigations. One or two of the guards must have known — and been well paid for silence. And Erma, that fat Lesbian, she would have known! And helped. And laughed. Nick doubted that Chung or Harper could have suspected what was going on. *El Mirador,* until now, had kept its secrets well.

He followed the glinting cables along another passage that had come suddenly in at right angles. He had come so far now, he reckoned, that he must be getting close to the labs. He must be under them. Then he saw the bob and glitter of flashlights not far ahead and heard the mutter of voices. He had left the dungeons, then, but who and what lay ahead?

One of the flashlights was bobbing toward him. Nick stepped into a shallow niche in the wall and waited. The man was, he guessed, looking for a break in the cable. Apparently they did not yet know where the real trouble was — in the generator room. Communication, as well as rapport, was not good between the castle and the labs, and that would work in his favor. But for how long? He was expecting the lights to go on any moment. If they caught him now he was dead.

The man came along the passage flashing his light on the cables. He was whistling to himself. Nick slipped the hunting knife from his belt. This must be silent and permanent. He was right up against it now and could not afford mercy.

The whistler loomed closer. In the reflection of the flashlight Nick could see that it was one of the Chinese soldiers. One poor devil, probably understanding nothing, who would never see the good earth of China again. For a moment the AXE agent was tempted to try to subdue the man without killing, then he decided against it. Too much was at stake.

The soldier was opposite the niche now. Nick stepped out and wrapped a steel-sinewed arm around the man's throat from behind,

shutting off any outcry. The soldier was strong and he struggled like a demon, but Nick yanked the head back and slit the throat all in one rapid motion. He felt the hot blood cascade over his hand. The man went limp. Air burbled from the slashed throat in soft little crepitations.

Nick lowered the body and dragged it back into the niche. He took the man's Tommy gun, which he had worn uselessly, slung in the small of his back, and checked the safety. It was on. He flicked it off. He risked a single flash of his light and saw that the man was too small. He could not wear the uniform and in any case it was sodden with blood now. He left the body where it was and went on down the passage, throwing his light on the cables every now and then. It was possible the others would think he was the soldier coming back.

The other lights had receded now. He could see them bobbing around like fireflies in what appeared to be a large open area. The passage was ending and suddenly he could smell the sea, fresh and distinct in his nostrils, welcome after the stench of the dungeons. It was an underground cavern, a lagoon of some sort running in from the Pacific. For one crazy wild moment Nick Carter thought he might find the Chinese sub moored here, the *Sea Dragon* Chung had mentioned, then he laughed at himself. The Chinese would think too highly of their nuclear sub to risk it in a trap like this.

He lingered at the end of the passage, where it widened into the cavern. It appeared to be spacious and high, though in the darkness he could not be sure. He had flicked off his own torch now and stood silent, thinking furiously to no great avail. He had no set plan. He had been improvising — he would just have to go on improvising. With the threat of the lights hanging over him like a sword.

To his right he could see faint yellow light coming from a half-open door. Candles or a lantern of some kind. With the Tommy gun ready he began to inch his way around the wall of the cavern, keeping his back against the rough surface.

Halfway to the lighted door he passed another door, this one of smooth steel, gelid and slick to his probing fingers. Without using his flash he explored the surface of the door, minutely, with his fingertips. In the center he found a dial with raised numerals. It was a vault. A huge safe with a combination lock on it.

Nick let out a little grunt of satisfaction. It would be where they kept the good money, that reaped in exchange for the counterfeit. How much did they have in there? Millions, no doubt. Money dedicated to the welfare and growth of the Serpent Party, money to bring it to power so that, behind a respectable façade, it could be a goad and a thorn to the United States.

Only the dead Chung Hee, or possibly Harper, would have the

combination. Nick did not have to concern himself. He moved on.

As he approached the open door he heard a spate of Chinese, rasped out too fast for him to catch the meaning. His Chinese was not too good in any case, except for Cantonese. This was a northern dialect, the harsh sound of Peking, and there was no mistaking the tone. Orders were being given. Harsh and angry orders.

He reached the open door and peered into the small vaultlike room. Two of the Chinese soldiers stood nearest the door, their machine guns trained on three men in white gowns who were working rapidly in the yellow light of a lantern hung from the ceiling. The white gowned men were stacking sheets of paper which they were taking from a large pile to another and smaller stack near a press. The press was small and looked old, though glistening with oil and well cared for, and was operated by a belt which ran to a small electric motor.

The AXEman's agile brain took in the gist of things immediately in a single flash of total comprehension. The press, the paper, the paper cutting and trimming machines — this was where the counterfeit five-dollar bills were being turned out. Obviously still being made, even though the bloom was off that particular rose. But then the Chinese Reds could always find a use for counterfeit as good as this.

The men in the white gowns were no doubt The Bitch's lab workers. Or had been. They were now working, under the gun, for the Chinese. Slave labor, you could call it. Even with the power gone, and the press inoperative, they were still being driven. Nick guessed that Chung Hee, no matter what he had said in the library, had had the wind up and was getting ready to pull out. Thus a last flurry of printing.

Where *were* the lights? Surely The Bitch and her guards had reached the generator room by now. Unless — and a coldness moved in him — unless she was maintaining the blackout for some reason of her own? That must be it. Gerda von Rothe was up to something, some move that must be hidden by darkness.

Suddenly he knew what it was, what she was doing. He had very little time. He had no time at all.

Nick Carter went into the vault like a hurricane. With the Tommy gun at hip level he gut shot the Chinese soldiers in two short staccato bursts. They sprawled, their machine guns slipping from lifeless hands. The men in white gowns stared at this monster who had appeared so suddenly, spitting flame. Nick yelled at them.

"Quick! You want to fight your way out — get their guns and go to it! I'm a friend. You got any sulfuric acid? Come on... come on—"

Three bewildered faces staring at him in an agony of fear and

surprise and indecision.

"Sulfuric acid," Nick roared. "Goddamn it! Sulfuric acid. You got any?"

The brightest of the men snapped out of it. He pointed with a trembling finger at a glass demijohn containing green liquid.

Nick leaped for the container, swung it up and ran with it to the small press. The plates were locked onto the press, those so precious printing plates which could not be genuine, yet somehow were. He put the demijohn on the press, directly over the plates, and backed off. He let go with a long raving burst from the Tommy gun. Glass shattered. Shards flew in every direction and the acid flooded the plates, bubbling and smoking, eating at the metal.

Nick put another long burst into the plates themselves, aiding the acid in its work of destruction. Then the job was done. The plates were useless, totally destroyed, and it was time to get out of there. He ran for the door, expecting to be met by a hail of gunfire. And knew that he was not yet ready to die. He went out the door in a long slide on his belly. Bullets ticked off the iron over him. A leaden insect bit him on the ankle.

The lights flashed on.

Chapter 11
The Net

Killmaster kept rolling like a barrel, hugging the side of the cavern. The huge lights blazing from the ceiling were stark, glaring, a blinding white that hurt his eyes. Later he knew that he owed his life to the suddenness of the lights; they had blinded everyone — the Chinese soldiers and The Bitch's guards who poured into the cavern from two directions. They came out of the passage Nick had just left and they poured through great sliding steel doors at the far end of the huge cave. Even as he moved and fired and frantically sought shelter Nick knew what the woman had done — she had deliberately kept the power off until she was ready to attack. Harper must be dead. Or had joined forces with her. Either way she was out to wipe out the Chinese, to take over once and for all.

The AXEman sensed that for the moment he was of no great importance. Thank God! It gave him what little chance he was going to have. To cut and run for it. His job was over. His duty now was to get back alive, with what he knew, and let the CIA and the Mexican police take over.

No one seemed to be shooting directly at him at the moment. He was caught in a crossfire. He huddled in the lean shelter of a tall stack of paper — the Chinese must have shipped in tons of the stuff — and made a rapid survey of the battleground. No sign of Gerda von Rothe herself. Her guards were keeping a heavy and constant fire on the little band of Chinese soldiers now holed up on a far ledge of the lagoon. The light dimmed a bit as the Chinese shot out a cluster of bulbs. That figured. The Chinese were badly outnumbered and would have a better chance in the dark.

The AXEman lay with his nose pressed against dank stone and let his eyes rove. He was immobile for the moment and that wouldn't do. Not at all. The harsh voice of his old sergeant rang in his ears — first law for survival in a fire fight: keep moving, keep moving, keep moving!

Bullets were ticking around him, whining off the wall over his head. He saw something he had missed before, a narrow opening in the cavern wall between himself and the vault with the combination lock on it. As he spotted it he saw a Chinese peer around the corner, snap off a burst with his Tommy gun, then disappear back into the passage.

A slug tugged at his bush jacket, now filthy and covered with blood. He had to move out. Any spot was better than this. He ran hard

for the mouth of the passage, crouching almost double and zigzagging. As he came within five yards of the passage the Chinese soldier popped into view again. His arm came up and over as he lobbed something toward the guards around the rear tunnel. A grenade!

As the soldier was ducking back into the passage he saw Nick coming at him. His eyes widened and he tried to get his machine gun around, but not in time. Nick let go a burst that took his head half off. The grenade let go with a sullen *whomp* and he heard men screaming. Nick dove into the cover of the passage as a fusillade rattled off the walls just behind him. He breathed again.

The tunnel in the stone was high and narrow, wide enough for one man. At the far end was a blaze of light and even above the gunfire Nick heard the chattering of a wireless key being pounded at high speed. This was their radio room. The operator must be working the submarine, *Sea Dragon*, lurking somewhere off the coast. Asking for help. Nick Carter charged into the radio room. Nothing much was going to help the Chinese now.

There was only one operator, alone, pounding frantically at his key. He turned as Nick came blasting in, terror written on the pale yellow face. He was a small man. Nick shot him out of the chair. He fell across the key, which set up a continuous wail of high voltage agony.

Nick aimed his Tommy gun at the transmitter and pressed the trigger. Nothing. The damned thing had jammed. No. Empty. His clip was exhausted and he had no spare.

There was another Tommy gun hanging from a spike hammered into the wall. Nick grabbed it and was about to let go a burst when he caught himself. Fool! He had a little time. Seconds. Use it to advantage.

He sat down at the key and began to send in clear. *Homer* might be listening. Certainly the CIA monitors would be. It was worth the precious seconds he was spending.

His fingers tapped at the bug, sending it too fast, sending it any old way, sprawling and garbled, but getting it out: *Carter — Carter — Carter — All Hell Loose El Mirador — Involves VIP Also Ivan, Cathay, Nazi — Send US and Mexican Cavalry Soonest — Most Urgent — Carter — Carter — Carter—*

Nick draped the body of the Chinese operator over the key again, depressing it so it would continue to send out the squealing note. The DF boys should be able to get a hard fix on that! He slipped into the narrow tunnel again, pausing to scoop half a dozen grenades out of a wooden box. He stowed the grenades in various pockets as he made his way up the passage again. The cavern still sounded like the Battle of the Bulge. The Chinese were putting up a hell of a fight.

On his belly he peered around the corner of the tunnel. The scene was in semi-darkness now. Most of the ceiling lights had been shot out. The Chinese were still on their ledge on the far side of the lagoon and the guards were keeping them pinned down. The Bitch's men seemed in no great hurry to rush the Chinese and in a moment Nick saw why. They were going to use rifle grenades. Nick watched as one of the guards near the rear tunnel jammed a stick grenade in his rifle barrel and aimed at the ledge over the lagoon. The man pulled the trigger. A soft *Phoooom.*

The rifle grenade fell short, bursting in the water but close enough to send a wave of spray over the trapped Chinese soldiers. The next grenade would be closer. After that the soldiers had had it. They must either surrender or die. Somehow Nick doubted that The Bitch intended taking prisoners. She was out for a clean sweep.

It was time for him to move again. He inched forward on his belly. He had not been spotted yet. Just ahead of him, maybe thirty feet from where he lay, he could see another ledge running along the lagoon. This ledge had duckboarding laid along it — he could see the gleam of wet wood in the dim light. It must lead toward the entrance of this underground cavern, this grotto, and that meant a way out to the Pacific. For him it was the only way out. Nick tensed and got ready to make the run for it. Those thirty odd feet looked like a mile.

A sudden storm of lead hailed around him. He cringed, feeling naked. He was half silhouetted in the light from the tunnel behind him. Dumb bastard! He rolled over, firing down the tunnel, and knocked out the light in the radio room. He kept rolling. Then he leaped to his feet and ran for the duckboarding and the ledge. At that moment the Chinese shot out the last ceiling light. No doubt it saved N3's life.

A dozen bloodshot eyes were winking at him. Lead streamed past on all sides. He made the ledge and zipped around the corner and fell sprawling on the wet duckboards, conscious of sweat leaking from every pore. Sweet Christ Almighty! He would never be any closer to death!

He got up and ran down the slippery duckboarding that hugged the wall of the lagoon. There was one light here, high up, and it revealed everything he needed to know.

Pilings had been put down and two crude piers erected, pushing into the limpid waters of the lagoon like wooden fingers. At each pier bobbed a midget submarine. So that was it! Nick had no doubt that their mother ship was the *Sea Dragon.* It was how Chung Hee and his men had been distributing the counterfeit. All up and down the western coast of the United States the midgets could come and go nearly at will, leaving the mother sub and creeping into remote coves

and desolate beaches where they would be met by the bad money pushers. It was little wonder the T-men and the Secret Service had been unable to cope.

The hatches of both midget subs were open as Nick ran toward them. Lights streamed from both and as he came abreast the first sub he saw a swirl of water at the stem. Were they running for it? If so — and his smile was that of a wolf who sees a strayed lamb — if so, no dice! So solly. He ran out on the pier, pulling the pin of a grenade as he did so. He tossed the grenade down the open hatch of the first sub and, without waiting for the explosion, tossed another. He ran for the other sub. Behind him he heard the roaring of the grenades in the enclosed space. Goodbye, little sub.

A face appeared in the hatch of the second sub. Nick let go a blast with his Tommy gun and the face vanished in a welter of shredded flesh and blood. He dumped two more grenades down the hatch and kept running, fleeing the ripping explosions.

As he ran Nick admitted to himself that he was tiring. His lungs were on fire and every breath was agony. His legs were made of wet rope. He was bleeding in half a dozen places. He was gasping, sobbing, moving on will power and instinct. If he couldn't rest soon, he knew, he would just have to lie down and die.

The grotto narrowed and lowered just here. The ledge ceased to be. Nick halted, clinging to the wall and panting, and examined the scene with a calm eye. His body was nearly done for, but his brain was still working well.

The entrance, and outlet, of the lagoon was under water. That wouldn't matter to the midget subs. It mattered to him. It meant that, in his condition, he was going to have to submerge and swim for it. How far? How long? He felt sickness move in his gut. It was a hell of a death — drowning in some rocky tube, blind and trapped and struggling.

He saw the net start to descend. The light was bad and for a moment he squinted to make sure. Yes. It was a tightly woven net of steel mesh, coming down now like a garage door to seal off the lagoon. It was now or never. Without thinking, even as he jettisoned the Tommy gun and the old Webley and ripped off the bush jacket and shirt, he knew whose finger had pressed the button that activated the net. The Bitch was back with a bang!

Nick would need the hunting knife to summon *Homer* if he got out of this. He went into the lagoon in a long flat dive, then reared up and kicked his way down. He had to beat that net to the bottom!

There had been no chance to aerate his lungs. He doubted he could do more than four minutes at the bottom. It should be long enough if he could beat the net — and if the tube leading out to the

sea wasn't too long. He went down and down, his eyes open, and could see nothing. The darkness was stygian. He would have to work by feel.

Killmaster was too late. As he touched bottom, slimy mud, he felt the leading edge of the steel net crunch down across his wrist. For a moment he struggled in panic, terrified of being trapped on the bottom, then calmness came back and he dug a little into the soft mud and extricated his hand. But he was on the wrong side of the net.

Nick began to paw at the mud, digging like a dog after a bone, to see if he could tunnel under the steel mesh. He knew it was a lost cause, still he kept digging, hurling the thick, viscous mud to both sides of him. Pain began gnawing at his lungs. Hardly two minutes had passed. He was in no shape to take this sort of punishment.

The shallow hole he had managed to dig was filling again as fast as he scooped it out. It was just no use. Torture in his lungs now. He would have to go up soon. That meant certain capture. Maybe a quick death. Maybe not. In any case it was not going to be pleasant.

His superb brain was still working — near to death from lack of oxygen — but still clicking over. Nick fumbled for the knife in his belt and slashed at the AXE tattoo on his arm. The Bitch hadn't noticed it in bed — she had been far too concerned with her own pleasure — but now it would be different. He was going to have to start lying and keep on lying, and hope for a miracle, but if she knew he was AXE it was over before it started.

Again he slashed at his arm, careful not to cut the artery. And again. That should do it. He might be able to pass it off as just another wound. He felt no pain but for the terrible flame in his lungs. He kicked upward.

Nick Carter came up to a new and instant peril that he could not have foreseen. The shark was possibly as shocked and frightened as was Killmaster. It had come in from the sea to explore the grotto, quietly minding its own business, and had been trapped by the netting. Then there had been the blood in the water and the shark knew it was hungry. It opened its maw and turned over, making for the lump of tired bait that was kicking around in the water nearby.

Nick saw the shark come for him and knew real terror. The man does not live who does not have, and conceal, some special night terror. The AXEman had started awake many times, sweat drenched, from dreams of being devoured by sharks.

He still had the knife. He waited. The water roiled in a miniature storm as the sleek long brute came at him with glinting rows of teeth. Nick struck out, despairing now, but also filled with a cold hatred for the brute fish. He felt the knife slide in deep. It was wrenched from his grasp. Gone.

He heard the shot only faintly. A strong white light was being trained on him. The shark was threshing about in its death throes. Nick trod water and shielded his eyes from the blinding beam, staring in the direction of the ledge.

"Come on, Jamie," said Gerda von Rothe. She waved the rifle at him. "The next one will be for you."

At her side were the two Dobermans. Behind the dogs, holding them on leash, was the squat Erma. It might have been a trick of his fatigued brain, but Nick thought he could see a glower of hate in the yellow eyes even at that distance.

Nearby were three or four of The Bitch's uniformed guards. All had machine guns trained on Nick. He was beaten. He began to swim toward the ledge.

With as much insouciance as he could muster Nick looked up at The Bitch and said, "Where you been, woman? What in hell's been going on, anyway? I damned near got killed. I was trying to get out of here — I didn't sign up for any war!"

He was too weak to pull himself out of the water. Two of the guards did it. Gerda von Rothe's green stare never left him. Nick, looking into those eyes, had the thought that emeralds were jello by comparison.

Chapter 12
The Mortal Kiss

Five minutes after the first beating began Nick passed out. It did not avail him for long. He came back to consciousness to find that nothing had changed, except that now both he and the swan bed were water soaked. They had dumped buckets on him. He was still tied to the bed, spread-eagled, naked as a newborn babe, and his tormentors were still there. Both of them. The Bitch and Erma. In the green eyes, and in the yellow eyes, he could discern no hint of mercy. Quite the contrary. Absurdly, but quite consonant with the surrealistic quality of the scene, a long forgotten quatrain of Kipling's came back to him.

> *When you lie wounded on Afghanistan's plains,*
> *And the women come out to cut up what remains—*
> *Just roll to your rifle and blow out your brains,*
> *And go to your God like a soldier!*

"I've got no rifle," Nick groaned. He did not know that he spoke aloud.

"What do you say?" It was Gerda von Rothe, who had been sitting in a chair near the bed, a Tommy gun snuggled across her knees. "What is this about a rifle, Jamie?"

The AXEman managed a tortured grin of derision. "Nothing, *memsahib.* I was dreaming, I guess. About death. And cool waters."

The Bitch loomed above him, one big hand on her hip, the other holding the machine gun. She had changed into riding breeches that ballooned over high, shiny black boots. She wore a black shirt open at the throat, unbuttoned to reveal her magnificent breasts. On her left arm she now wore a scarlet brassard with, a swastika etched in green. The Crooked Cross!

"I see you're in uniform," Nick said. "Showing the true colors at last, eh?"

Her large white teeth glinted at him. "For only a little time. Then I must go back to playing my role as before. But never mind me — it is *your* true colors I am interested in, Jamie. That is not your real name, of course, as we both know. What is it? And what are you after? You would not, by any chance, be working for the Mexican Government?"

He knew he must be careful in the lies he told. He had tried the ignorant, gold tramp, Jamie bit on the way back to this bedroom and

it had earned him a gun butt in the back of the head. That cover was blown forever. What could he substitute for it? Then Nick had an inspiration. Tell her part of the truth — she would never believe it.

He said: "You ever hear of a man called *El Tigre?* A bandit?"

The Bitch nodded. "Of course. He hides out around here, somewhere in this vicinity. My guards keep a sharp eye on him. I think he would like to raid this place, to loot it, but he does not dare. So what of it?"

Come dusk, Nick thought, come dusk and you will see what of it! If *El Tigre* kept his promise. Stuck to the plan. And if the AXEman could keep his share of the bargain. At the moment the latter did not seem likely.

"I work for *El Tigre,*" he told her. "I'm a plant. My job was to get into the castle and spy out the land, get all the details. The Tiger is planning on taking you, sister, sometime next week. And that," he lied, "is the truth."

Gerda von Rothe stared down at him, contempt in the green eyes. "Is that the best you can do?"

Nick nodded. "All a man can do is tell the truth."

She went back to her chair. "Erma!"

Nick Carter had never dreamed the day would come when he would be afraid of a woman. He was afraid of Erma. Not a physical fear exactly, he knew he could endure her worst; it was rather because she *was* a woman, after all, and the sight of her left a nasty green trail of nauseous slime in his belly. He looked at her now and forced a grin and, more to bolster his own courage than out of defiance, said: "The Gestapo sure missed a bet when they missed you, baby doll."

Erma stood beside the bed and gazed down at Nick with slitted yellow eyes. She would have been ludicrous had she not been so sinister. She was dressed as before, in a man's trousers and shirt, but now she also wore a brassard with a swastika on it. And where her lumpy potato face had been red before now it was pale, livid, with dark circles beneath her eyes. She breathed hard as she stared down at Nick. She licked her thick lips with a blunt, coated tongue.

"The Gestapo missed no bets," she told him. "I worked for them as a young girl. It was pleasant work."

The whip she held was long and shiny and black. Six lashes of plaited leather were attached to the stock. Erma drew the lashes through her fingers and licked her lips again.

"That figures," said Nick, eyeing the whip. "You turn in your father and mother? Cousins, too? By the dozens, I'll bet. You whip them too?"

"Some I whip," said Erma stolidly. "Some I do other things to — some I just kill quick. You I will not kill quick."

The Bitch said: “Get on with it, Erma! And be careful — not too much around the private parts. I may have use for him later.”

Erma raised the whip. The muscles writhed in her great biceps. Nick closed his eyes. Here we go again. He tried to remember how bad the pain had been before. He couldn’t. Funny, that. You could never exactly recall how pain felt. You just had to experience it over and—

Erma brought the whip down across his naked chest. Nick groaned. He had promised himself he would not — but he groaned. Six white hot lengths of wire were dragged across his flesh. Again. Lower this time. The pain was steady now, with no respite, and he heard himself yelling and lurching and tugging at the cords that held him to the bed.

Still lower now. She was flailing at his belly with liquid fire, but careful to avoid his genitals. Saving me for stud work, Nick thought just as he screamed again.

His upper legs now. Then down past the knees and across his calves and shins. Sweat dripped from the woman’s blotchy face, ran in salty little streams from under her piled corona of yellow-gray hair. Her eyes were slits, her mouth a stretched pale anus. The big arm went up and down, up and down. Nick felt himself passing out again. It was not to be borne. Let go... let go and fall into the deep hole, the black hole of unconsciousness. Let go!

“That’s enough for now,” said Gerda von Rothe. “I want him conscious. Get the alcohol, Erma.”

Nick kept his eyes closed, hovering on the verge of the dark pit. He knew what was coming and braced himself for the sting. And got an idea. Maybe he could buy a little time. Anything — anything but that whip again.

He heard the heavy tread of Erma coming back from the bathroom. He squinted. She was carrying a large bottle of rubbing alcohol. She sprinkled it over him, into the raw bloody stripes, and his flesh screamed at the new torment. And though he tried, he could not restrain his tongue.

“Nice of you,” he murmured. “After all, you wouldn’t want me to get blood poisoning.”

The Bitch was standing at the bed again. Was that a gleam of reluctant admiration in her green agate eyes?

It was. She said: “You are quite a man, Jamie, or whatever your name is. You are perhaps the sort of man I have been looking for all my life. It is too bad that you had to spoil it.” There was genuine regret in the shrug of her big shoulders. Regret and something else. She was staring down at Nick’s midriff. Her tongue whipped around her lips like a small red snake. Nick glanced down at himself and, despite all the lingering pain, could hardly restrain a laugh. Of all

times, and places, to have a reaction! But there it was. The whipping had somehow aroused him. Now his reaction was arousing her, exciting this sadistic bitch who was so well named.

Desperately the AXEman sought for some ploy, for some way to exploit the situation. Sex and Death were the yin and yang of existence — in his case he just might be able to change Death to Life. But first, time — he must gain a little time!

"Have I spoiled it?" He managed a faint grin. "Can't we start over, Gerda? I've had enough. I can't take any more. I'll do anything you say — be anything you say. I'll help you fight off *El Tigre* when he comes next week. Only don't let her whip me any more. Please!"

Again the reluctant shrug. She tore her eyes away from his body. "It is too late. I cannot trust you."

"All right, but don't torture me. Kill me quickly." He was "acting" desperately now. Somehow he had to keep her interest, keep her aroused, goad her into the fantastic act of which, he was betting, her twisted mind was capable. Then, and only then, he might have a chance.

"I... I can tell you some things, Erma! Things you don't know — that you should know. I did overhear Chung Hee and Harper talking after you left."

She was in her chair again, lounging, the machine gun on her lap. Erma was at the tall windows, her back to them, pulling the bloody lashes slowly through her fingers. Nick realized that she was not missing a word.

Gerda von Rothe patted back an artificial yawn. Nick thought it was feigned boredom, for her eyes never left his body.

"What could you possibly tell me about Harper and Chung Hee that would be of any interest? The Chinese is dead and Harper soon will be. He is hiding somewhere around the castle now, but he cannot get away. Anyway I know all about them. Not that it matters now. They are finished."

"Maybe not," said Nick. "Did you know that Harper was a Russian agent? A double! The Kremlin knows about this little setup, Gerda. They were trying to toss a monkey wrench into the Peking machinery — you don't think they're going to let you new Nazis get away with anything. The Russians hate Nazis a lot worse than they do the Chinese — that's only a matter of politics. With you people, with the Nazis, it's a deep blood hatred."

He had shocked and surprised her. The green eyes broke off their avid devouring of his middle and swiveled to meet his own. "You seem to know and understand a great deal. Certainly you do not talk like a bandit. But this claim of yours — that Harper is a Russian agent. Why should I believe you?"

This part was easy. “You saw Chung’s body, or Hurtada, or whatever. Harper killed him. I saw it, remember. He had to. Chung was going to kill *him,* on orders from Peking. They had found out the truth about Harper. He was a Russian agent, all right.”

A soft flow of obscenity oozed from her red mouth. “I think I believe you, Jamie, whoever you are. The clever bastard! All the years he has worked for me and I did not suspect. I did not even know that he was working for the Chinese until he and Chung moved in and took over.”

From the window Erma said, “You are talking too much, Gerda.”

“Shut up,” said The Bitch. “What matter if he is going to die anyway? And it amuses me to talk just now. So shut up — and bring me some whiskey and soda. Hurry up.”

Erma shot a malevolent glance at the AXEman as she left the room. The message in the yellow eyes was plain. You might be fooling *her,* they said, but you are not fooling *me.*

Nick said, “You see — I did tell you something you didn’t know. Shouldn’t it buy me something? Like an easier death? I can’t stand any more torture — I’ll go out of my mind.”

The Bitch laughed at him. “I do not really care one way or the other. But whipping you gives Erma pleasure, you see. Real sexual pleasure. Poor thing. She does not have much fun these days. It is a pity.”

“My heart hurts for her.”

She laughed again. “You would not understand. You are too normal. So beautifully normal, Jamie. I think I shall continue to call you that until — well, until it is over. It is a nice name. I really wish it were your own, and that things were different. You are a superb man, Jamie. The best I ever had — and I have had many.”

He had to keep her talking. “One thing I would like to know before you kill me — are you really seventy years old? It can’t do any harm to tell me now.”

The Bitch came to the bed. With the cold nose of the Tommy gun she poked around at his private parts, a lascivious grin on her wide red mouth.

“No harm at all,” she agreed. “I will, in fact, my Jamie, give a boon to you who are going to die. I will answer any of your questions. It does not matter.”

“Well, then? Are you really seventy?”

She was enjoying herself. She poked him hard with the Tommy gun and he winced.

“Of course I am not seventy, you poor fool. I am thirty-six. It was all a hoax to promote the sale of White Lily creams. My name is not even Gerda. It is Gretel. Gerda was my mother’s name. When she died

I buried her secretly and took her place. It was all Harper's idea — he is a clever bastard and very good at his work. It was he who handled all the publicity, who built up the legend that I was seventy and had been preserved by my creams. It was good — it made us rich and it was good cover for my real work."

Her eyes had left his flesh now and there was a fanatic glow in them.

"Der Tag?" Nick kept his tone soft and low.

Her eyes burned down into his. She flung her right arm up in the Nazi salute. "Yes! The day! It will come again. Be sure of that. Not the old ones, but the new. The Hitler Youth, as I was, will come into their own. Hitler is not dead. Hitler will never die. Heil Hitler!"

"Heil Hitler!" It was Erma. She came toward them, a tray of drinks balanced on one huge hand, the other raised in the salute. "Heil Hitler! And now, Gerda, I think it is time we killed this one. After a little more whipping, of course."

The Bitch smiled in amusement. "You do not have to pretend any longer, Erma. He knows I am not Gerda. I have told him the truth." She poured herself half a glass of whiskey and drank it neat. Nick moistened his lips. She saw the movement and poured more whiskey in her glass, then held it to his lips. Nick choked and sputtered as the fiery stuff flowed down his gullet.

As The Bitch took the glass away she patted Nick's head and looked at Erma. "I am not sure I want to kill him just yet. Perhaps I will give him a choice, my good Erma. A chance, perhaps I should say. There are still the cells, you know. After all, the stupid Americans have one song that makes a great deal of sense — a good man *is* hard to find!"

"Not the cells, please," said Nick. "I saw them. And what was in them. I hate rats. And I hate starving."

Gerda von Rothe — he was always to think of her so — half filled her own glass again and drank. This time she chased the spirit with soda. Nick felt a micro-inch of hope grow in him. If she got drunk enough — but that was a toss up, too. She might just blast him with the Tommy gun.

Erma had been staring at her mistress with open mouth and wide eyes. "You are a fool, Gretel. You would risk everything just to have sport with this carrion! This *man."* There was venom in the word. "When there is so much to be done — such a terrible mess to be cleaned up, so much to be hidden, buried. And the man Harper has not yet been found."

"To hell with Harper," snarled The Bitch. "We have wrecked his car and all the exits are guarded. He cannot get away. In time we will hunt him down and kill him like the rat he is — but not now. Right

now I am going to have some fun with Jamie boy here!" She tossed the machine gun to the startled Erma, who nevertheless caught it deftly and immediately swung the muzzle toward Nick's defenseless belly.

"Gretel! What are you — have you gone stark raving mad?" There was genuine shock in the big woman's voice. She stared with bulging eyes as her mistress began to strip off her clothes. In less than a minute The Bitch was down to her lovely tawny buff, as naked as Nick himself. She took a knife from beneath the cushions of the chair and approached Nick. As she bent over him, her big breasts, as firm and cool as ripe melons, brushed his wounded chest. She moved her breasts provocatively on his flesh. Daubs of Nick's blood stained the long nipples.

The Bitch swayed over him. He saw that she was a little drunk already. Two half glasses made a glass — and that was a lot of whiskey. Especially if she had no great tolerance for it. His hopes went up another peg. He might be able to weasel out of this yet. It would take a miracle — maybe he was going to get one.

She was about to cut him free. Erma was glowering in helpless anger, her finger on the trigger of the Tommy gun, itching to blast him. Careful. So careful.

To stall her, because he wanted to give the booze a chance to work a bit longer, he said: "You promised you would answer questions, Gerda — I mean Gretel. I've got one more that's been worrying me. Those plates. The counterfeit plates. Who made them? Where did you get them?"

The naked woman swayed, the knife poised, her green eyes a trifle out of focus now. "Huh? Oh, the plates, Jamie. You want to know about the plates. So that's it — that's who you are, Jamie. You're a Treasury agent! A stinking United States T-man! I should have guessed it before."

It did not matter now. The next few minutes would decide his life or death. Nick Carter nodded. "All right. I am a T-man. I was after the plates and I found them. I destroyed them. But I would like to know the truth—"

She put the point of the knife against his chest and drew a bloody half inch slit. "So you shall, Jamie, so you shall. I keep my word. Those plates were genuine, the real thing. Our people stole them back in 1941, just before Pearl Harbor. It was one of the great all-time coups of the *Abwehr*." She saw the disbelief in his face. "It is true, I tell you!" The Bitch was shouting now. "They were Germans, remember, and they had put their minds to accomplishing the impossible. They did it. They stole the plates and replaced them with excellent forgeries. And it was the *forgeries* the stupid Americans destroyed!

While the real plates were in a vault in Berlin. But my people could never produce the proper paper, a paper good enough, so the plates could not be used. When the war was lost, my mother and I came to Mexico. Her lover came with her — and he brought along the plates, which he had managed to steal. They were not Nazis, those two, not good Germans. But they saw a chance to get rich on the deeds of other men, greater men. I was only sixteen then and could do nothing, but I knew. I knew and I watched and I waited. The lover died first. Then my mother. Then I had my chance. I planned for years — then those Chinese devils moved in on me. And that is enough of talking, my Jamie."

The Bitch was slashing at the cords that bound Nick. She tossed the knife toward Erma and slipped down beside Nick on the swan bed. "Now, lover, show me once more how good you are! Make me swoon. If you completely satisfy me I will not kill you just yet. I will put you in a cell and keep you for other times." She giggled drunkenly and saliva ran from the corners of her wide scarlet mouth. "I may even feed you, Jamie." And she wriggled under him.

Every movement was torture to his flayed and bloody flesh, but Nick found himself capable. Amazing. Over his shoulder The Bitch said, "Keep the gun on him every second, Erma. If he makes one false move you have my permission to kill him."

The drunken laughter echoed wildly around the vast bed chamber. The Bitch sank her teeth into Nick's ear. "Come on, Jamie. Come on, big lover man. Sing for your supper."

It was not exactly singing, but then he wasn't exactly Tommy Tucker. As he fell into a steady rhythm Nick was thinking at least two moves ahead. And working on the capped tooth with his tongue. Under the cap was a tiny pellet of cyanide. He had obeyed orders and brought it with him. Now it might pay off. Might. Almost as big a word as *if*.

The Bitch had her eyes closed. She began to moan softly. Nick risked a covert look at Erma. The fat woman was still in the chair, the Tommy gun ready, but she was leaning forward and he saw the excitement on her mottled features. That might help him. Excitement might throw off her aim just enough—

He managed to tongue the cap off his molar. He moved the cap to one side of his mouth, not daring to use a finger to get it out. He could feel the little cyanide pellet in his mouth now, smooth and deadly. It was made of gelatin, that pellet, and it was already beginning to melt. He had to get rid of it. Now!

Nick emitted a long, simulated moan. He clamped his mouth down hard on the open, moist, red cavern of Gerda's mouth. He had not kissed her before and now he took her by surprise. Then she

responded to the kiss. Her tongue was a moist dagger stabbing into his mouth. Nick deftly tongued the cyanide pellet into her mouth. This was the crucial moment. If she suspected — if she felt the pellet—

He gave a tremendous thrust that brought a scream from her. She arched to meet him. He felt her swallow convulsively. It was done. Now to conceal the fact until the pellet melted. And when it did — to conceal her death until he could get a chance at Erma.

The Bitch, all unaware of the death working in her, was clinging and wriggling frenetically. Nick let one of his outstretched hands stray carelessly toward the edge of the bed where he had seen her turn off the alarm. He would have to turn it *on.* The sudden deafening clangor might throw Erma's aim off a bit. He needed every bit of help he could get — because he was going to have to jump that Tommy gun!

Gretel von Rothe arched her long spine and tried to scream. Her green eyes opened wide for a moment and stared into Nick's. In that split second of time, her last on this earth, he read fear, terror and realization. Then the green seemed to fade and she went lax in his arms. Now if only Erma would mistake the death convulsion for that of love—

"What is wrong? What you do to her?" He heard her get out of the chair and start toward him. He flopped over, nearer the edge of the bed, his hand seeking beneath it. Desperately he played for time. "Wrong? Nothing is wrong. She just, well, you know. And you know she always sleeps afterward." Where in hell was that lever, or button, or whatever the hell it was?

Nick's finger touched a tiny switch. He flipped it over. As he did so the huge double doors of the bedroom slammed open. Maxwell Harper stood there, swaying, his shirt front one big gout of blood. He pointed a pistol at Erma and fired.

And missed.

The alarm bells let go with a hellish clangor. Erma swung the Tommy gun toward Harper and let go a burst that caught the big man in the belly. The blast of lead swept him back out the doors, spinning and clutching at the walls for support.

Killmaster came off the bed in a long plunging dive. It was the only chance he was ever going to get and he knew it. But he was Killmaster now and he summoned his last strength for the effort. No illusions. It was kill or be killed.

He got in under the burst of slugs. Flame seared his face and powder pocked his flesh. He drove a right hand into one basketball-sized breast, over her heart. Erma gasped, her mouth opened and she dropped the Tommy gun. Nick hit her again in the belly, his fist sinking deep into hard flab.

Erma poked the fingers of her right hand into his eyes. She

grabbed his right arm and pulled him forward and sent him crashing to the floor in a hip throw. Nick felt as though a boulder had dropped on his skull. For a moment he had doubts. God, she was tough!

But she had thrown him right on the Tommy gun. He picked it up and sighted on her — she was charging like an enraged water buffalo — and pulled the trigger. The gun jammed. Nick threw it as far as he could and ducked the karate chop. He slipped and fell and she tried to kick him in the genitals. He rolled away in time, but felt his flesh rip and burn as her shoe tore along his leg. She had razor blades in the tips of her shoes.

Erma charged him again. Filth poured from the anus-like mouth. The yellow eyes were crazy with hate. Nick launched himself at her. He butted her in the stomach. She sat down, winded, but when he lunged at her again she rolled back, put up her stubby football legs, got her feet into his belly and tossed him over her head. He landed with a tearing shock that nearly finished him. This kid knew all the tricks!

She came after him. He was dazed and nearly helpless for the moment and she got behind him. He felt his head yanked back, brutally, and something ropy, sleek yet fibrous, woman smelling, slipped around his throat. His air was cut off!

Erma was strangling him with her hair. With one of the long braids she wore coiled around her head. Now she was using it like a thuggee cord. The room started to whirl and turn black. The pressure was inexorable, terrible, and he could not break the hold. His tongue was protruding between his lips, his teeth biting into it, his whole magnificent and wounded body racked and dying for lack of air.

One thing — one chance. He felt backward, his hand groping down between the thick soft-firm muscular thighs. She was kneeling behind him, legs wide apart. He reached her crotch, rammed his hand, his nails, brutally into her and began to pull her apart. As from a distance he heard her scream. The rope of hair fell away from his throat.

There was time for one breath. No more. She was rolling away from him. He swiveled, caught her in the face with his elbow. Under the fat chin with his locked double-hands. She cursed and swung at him and Nick reeled back from the blow. My God! What an Amazon.

She kicked at his groin, attempting to castrate him with the razor blades. Nick tried to catch her jaw with a right cross, missed, and the terrible blow pulped her nose. Blood gushed.

Erma rushed at him again. Nick ducked and threw a full body block at her knees. She went hurtling over him, her raw face a mask of blood. He heard a crash of breaking glass. Then he heard Erma screaming. Screaming and screaming. All the way down.

Nick Carter stood staring vacantly at the shattered window. He swayed. He was naked and covered with blood. The alarms were still going like mad, only now they all seemed to be coming from his skull. It would never have occurred to him, but an astute and knowledgeable observer might have compared him to a figure by Michelangelo that had somehow managed to return from Hell.

He staggered to the bed and flipped off the alarm. The moment the bells ceased to clamor he was aware of a different sound. Gunfire. Shouts. Screams. Grenades.

Nick wavered back to the broken window again. It was dark out. Rain was falling in black slanting sheets.

He remembered. *El Tigre!*

Painfully he went to the long closet and pulled out some clothes. Pants, a shirt, shoes, anything put on any old way. He had to get out of this hell-hole of a castle.

As he passed the swan bed on the way out, he cast a last look at the naked Bitch. She was on her back, eyes staring at the ceiling in fixed green contemplation. Nick flapped a hand in the direction of the bed and went out the double doors.

He fell over Harper's body and for a moment could not get up. It would be so nice to lie there. Forever. To sleep—

"Amigo? You are *alive?"*

Nick opened one eye and peered up. *El Tigre,* wrapped in bandoleers, his sombrero tilted rakishly, was staring down at him. In one hand he carried a rifle, in the other a bottle of The Bitch's prize scotch. Behind him, grinning at Nick, was the brother Pancho and a couple of bandits.

El Tigre repeated his question. "You live, amigo?"

"You tell me." His voice seemed to be coming back from Echo Canyon. Nick tried to get up, failed, and settled for his hands and knees. *El Tigre* squatted beside him, put a hand on his shoulder. His grin was wide and white and there was a hint of awe in his eyes. "I owe you much thanks, *amigo,* for helping me. You did a job, but *magnifico.* Never have I seen such a battlefield in my life. It was very easy for my men. Again all my thanks."

Nick held up a hand. "*De nada,* Señor. But you'd better take it on the lam — and fast. The Mexican cops are due any minute — and God knows who else. I don't want to be caught here, either. Can you lend me a horse?"

El Tigre was helping him to his feet. "Anything, *amigo!* But of course — anything at all." He turned to snap orders at Pancho and the other bandits, then back to Nick: "I spit in the milk of the police! But *gracias"*

Nick started to lurch down the corridor. *El Tigre* stopped him with

a firm hand. "*Momentito, amigo.* Have you forgotten my promise to myself — this yearning I have for the raping of The Bitch! I have not. Where is she, then?"

Nick started to explain. Then he thought the hell with it. He was too tired. He jerked a thumb at the double doors. "In there. Go ahead. She's not dangerous now."

El Tigre patted his shoulder. "Wait for me, *amigo.* There is time. I have sentries who will hold off the police for a little time. This will not take long, I can assure you." He took a long swig from the bottle and handed it to Nick. "Ahh — at last my dream is come true."

Nick watched him disappear into the bedroom. He grinned faintly. What a fooling *El Tigre* was going to get.

When the bandit chief did not reappear immediately Nick went to the bedroom and glanced in. He grimaced and clung to the door for support. Slowly he shook his head. This was a first — even for Killmaster. He had seen some strange and terrible things in his line of work. Never anything like this.

El Tigre was fulfilling his promise to rape the woman. Even in death.

Chapter 13
Terminación

Nick Carter lay in Homer's tiny sick bay and stared at the mass of pipes and ducts writhing across the low ceiling. A Navy medic had bandaged his many hurts and shot him full of dope. The stuff had induced in Killmaster a lovely euphoria. For the moment he was quite content; he was secure, in a "safe house," and he did not have to move his weary bones.

He was a little vague about matters at the last. Pancho, by *El Tigre's* orders, had poured Nick full of booze and gotten him on a horse. Then Pancho and another bandit had accompanied him to the beach where he was to meet *Homer.* This while *El Tigre* looted the castle and planned his escape.

Nick found himself hoping that *El Tigre* would make it. He was a weirdie, to put the kindest face on it — maybe he was *loco* — but he had been a friend in need. That the bandit would have killed Nick without thinking twice, had his interests so dictated it, did not signify. Matters had worked out. Yes, Nick found himself wishing *El Tigre* well. He would need all the luck he could get. He would probably live a very short life. With the deaths of Harper and Chung Hee and The Bitch and Erma, the CIA could no longer have need of *El Tigre.* They would unleash the Federal Police again, toss him to the wolves. Run fast, *El Tigre.* Run far.

When the Mexican police got around to a minute scrutiny of the raped castle, ruined *El Mirador,* they would find some baffling matters. They would also find a vault full of money, good U.S. money, which Nick had no doubt they would confiscate. Let the CIA worry about all that. He, Nick Carter, had gotten out in time. There was nothing to tie AXE in with this operation. That would please Hawk.

He tried to remember just how he came to be back aboard *Homer.* Pancho had left him on the beach, lying there in the sand, with a soft-voiced *adiós.* He could dimly remember them saying something about a submarine, *el submarino,* and then the sound of their horses going off at a tearing gallop.

But he could not have summoned *Homer!* He had lost the hunting knife with the beeper in the hilt. Had left it sticking in the shark that had attacked him in the lagoon. How, then, had the sub happened to be there?

Nick was remembering more clearly now. He could recall the rubber boat, the gentle hands, the hurry and the whispers as they took him back out to *Homer.* Then the needle and blessed sleep.

The lieutenant in command of *Homer* came into the sick bay and grinned at Nick. “Feeling better, sir?” There was, Nick noticed with the beginnings of curiosity, something about the lieutenant that was new. A kind of excitement. A subdued intensity. And that grin — the kid looked like a cat that had just worked out a foolproof scheme for getting the canary!

“At least I *can* feel,” Nick answered. “Nothing broken, the medic tells me. I lost a little blood, it seems. Nothing a couple weeks of sleep won’t fix.” To himself he added: plus a few birds and bottles, and a beautiful girl. For a moment he thought with regret of Angelita Dolores Rita Inez Delgado. How nice to see her again with a little time at his disposal. Then he shrugged the thought away. Too young for him, really. And going back might spoil the memory. He would find someone else. No problem, ever, for him.

“How come you people picked me up when you did?” he asked. “I didn’t send the beeper signal. I couldn’t. I lost the damned thing.”

The lieutenant sat on the edge of the bed. He took off his cap and smoothed his hair. He was balding at the peak.

“We caught your message, sir, and then we took a fix on the signal you sent out.” He looked at Nick quizzically. “Frankly, sir, none of it made much sense to me. But San Diego was getting the fix, too, and they signaled me to go in after you, to keep the rendezvous at once — just in case. I guess it’s a good thing we did.”

“I guess it is.” Someone had used his head, Nick thought. Probably it had been Hawk, who would have been in on everything, and knew that when his boy sent a distress signal things were really bad.

“Speaking of San Diego,” said Nick, “aren’t we taking a long time to get there?”

The lieutenant nodded. “Afraid so, sir. We have to run on the surface. We, ah, we had a little accident at sea. Sustained some damage and we’re just sort of limping back home.”

“Yeah?” Nick raised himself on an elbow. “What happened?”

An odd look came over the lieutenant’s face. He was dying to talk about it, to zero this rugged-looking character in on the truth — he had a feeling there was a connection — but he remembered his orders.

“I... I’m sorry, sir. I can’t talk about it. Classified.” He got up to leave. “We’ll be in San Diego in a few hours, sir. Good luck.”

At the door he glanced back at Nick. “We had a collision at sea, sir. That’s all I can tell you.” Nick was never sure whether the lieutenant winked, or had something in his eye.

He lay back, lit a cigarette from a pack from sea stores and went back to staring at the ceiling. So *Homer* had rammed *Sea Dragon*. Had stumbled on the Chinese sub at night and rammed her. It *would* be

classified information — forever! Let Peking wonder about the sub that never came back.

In spite of all the hell he raised they took him to the Naval Hospital in San Diego. In vain Killmaster tugged and pulled at every string he could find — the doctors were adamant. He was in for at least a week of shots, vitamins, X-rays and the sumptuous Navy food.

There was a ray of sunshine. Her name was Barbara Holt, as petite and lovely a Naval nurse as Nick had ever seen. She had red hair. Nick could not understand how Hollywood had overlooked her.

He sweet-talked her into letting him use an official phone. She smuggled him into the private office of some High Brass, at night, and he called Hawk. At home, at first, and when that phone did not answer he called the office in Washington proper. Hawk must be working around the clock, as he so often did.

When his boss came on Nick said, “Better scramble, sir.”

“I am.”

Nick talked for ten minutes. When he had finished Hawk cleared his throat and said, “Well done, N3. Very good job. Of course the CIA has already been in touch with me. The Director is very pleased, *very* pleased! You are up for a medal and a citation, I believe. Personally I don’t approve — your ego is quite large enough now, and besides there is the matter of security — but I’m afraid they are going to insist.”

Nick said: “Sir? Am I now officially released from loan to the CIA? I am now AXE again — and only AXE? Responsible only to you and the President?”

“You are. Why?”

When Hawk hung up there was a puzzled expression on his lined old face. He rang for his secretary. “Better have Technical check this scrambler, Miss Stokes. N3 couldn’t have said what I thought he said — something about spitting in the milk!”